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THE BENGALI DRAMA

ITS ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT

By

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" Drama is action, sir, action, not confounded philosophy."

—*Luigi Pirandello.*

NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

The system followed in the transliteration of Sanskrit words is that approved by the Royal Asiatic Society in 1923. The same system has also been observed in transliterating Bengali words with the following exceptions :—

(1) The inherent vowel has been generally neglected in cases where it is mute in Bengali pronunciation.

(2) Bengali pronunciation does not distinguish between the labial *b* and the semi-vowel *v* except when the latter is immediately preceded by another consonant, and so, as a rule, in transliterating genuinely Bengali words, it is only in this latter case that the semi-vowel has been represented by *v*. There are, however, a few words such as Śiva, Vaiṣṇava, etc., and some suffixes like *vatī* which are familiar to English readers in this form and it has seemed best in such cases to adhere to the ordinary spelling.

(3) Some Bengali family names such as Tagore, Banerji, Mukherji, etc., have been written in the conventional English form instead of Ṭhākur, Bānārji, Mukhārji, etc.

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FOREWORD

I BELIEVE my present work on the Bengali drama, however imperfect and inadequate, meets a long-felt need. Being first in the field, I am aware of the limitations under which I had to work. I do not say that there have been no previous attempts at all to deal with this subject, but no historical account worthy of the name existed, at least none that I could profitably lay hands on. But I fully expect that there will be many in the future who will follow it up and perhaps deal with it more extensively, having in possession hitherto undiscovered facts, and I venture to think that they could safely depend on my work. Although this book contains matter for historians, it is not so much an attempt from an orthodox historical standpoint as a direct criticism of what I consider to be genuinely dramatic in the literature of Bengal, past or present.

I have brought the account of the modern Bengali drama right up to 1930, and in my concluding chapter, I have referred to influences and tendencies which are in operation to-day. I have criticized freely and without prejudice the methods and practices of the theatres of the old school and have also made constructive suggestions to those of the new school, drawing their attention to what has been achieved and is being practised by the most advanced and modern theatres in England, America, and Europe. In fact, my work throughout has been on comparative lines, and I thought that it was right that it should be so, because the modern drama in Bengal is the direct outcome of European influences. No doubt, the story of a modern Bengali play is perfectly indigenous, the atmosphere is thoroughly typical of Bengal and the language also is the vernacular, but the theatre as an institution, with its appendages and appurtenances, is an importation from the West. I see no shame in admitting that. But certainly the shame will be if, for any reason, the Bengali theatre should twist backwards and fall behind. There is not quite as yet a complete harmony between a Bengali play and its setting, because the synthesis which can only result from complete assimilation and not meaningless imitation, is yet to

be attained. I cannot help criticizing the modern Bengali stage for its lack of realism in production as well as technique. Whereas the European stage has altogether too much of it, for which nowadays even a defence is necessary, the Bengali stage shows almost a total absence of it. But this is not so serious a defect as the preponderance of talk over action in most Bengali productions. The text of a play, no doubt, has to be set down in words; but the theatre is *not* literature and words are not everything in a successful play. Movement and action are not merely accessories to the text, but vital factors. No drama is possible without them. Action need not be merely external, but it would have to be visible, audible, and intelligible. I cannot emphasize this point too strongly on Bengali playwrights. They should not be on top of the theatre all the time. They must not hamper or burden it with text which cannot be artistically expressed with eye, voice, gesture, or motion. Absolutely the first question to ask about a play should be whether it is good for the theatre. If it is not, then it is not a good play. In Bengal, drama will not reach its highest point of excellence unless its makers follow the indispensable principles and standards of stage-craft.

CALCUTTA.
26th March, 1930.

THE BENGALI DRAMA
ITS ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT

INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER I

The Relation of the Yātrā to the Ancient Indian Drama

The dramatic art, like all other great human discoveries, is the result of a long series of innovations and experiments. Its evolution is a process of continuous growth from the irregular and formless types to the more regular and definite, and of gradual transition from the simple and crude to the more complex and finished. Unfortunately, the links between the different stages of the gradual growth and development of the drama in Bengal are broken and obscure. The Yātrās [1] of Bengal, as they exist to-day, are evidently a very old type of popular play. They may possibly have lineally descended from similar dramatic representations and folk-plays current in the earliest period of Hindu history or even in a period before recorded history begins. But no decisive historical facts can be brought forward to corroborate either supposition. Whether in Bengali Yātrās are a direct continuation of the ancient Vedic drama or whether they are connected with the dramatic activities of a much later time has been the subject of much discussion among various Indologists. Mr. E. P. Horrwitz thinks that "even the Vedic age knew Yātrās, a venerable heirloom of Aryan antiquity. The gods of the Ṛgveda were hymned in choral processions. Some of the Samvada-hymns re-echo the rude mirth of the

[1] For a description of the Yātrā itself, see Chap. IV, pp. 20–2.

primitive Yātrā-dances." [1] Dr. Hertel [2] regards the Yātrās of Bengal as constituting a distinct stage in the evolution of Indian drama. In his view, the beginnings of the drama in India are to be sought in the dramatic rituals connected with Vedic hymns and dialogues and a later stage in the development is to be found in the *Suparṇadhāya*, which is manifestly a much later Vetdic text. The Yātrās of Bengal would in this case represent the form assumed by the Vedic drama in the latest stage of its evolution. Professor Max Müller was one of the first Sanskrit scholars to point out the connection of Indian drama with the dramatic rituals which are implicit in the Vedic dialogue-hyesns. He conjectured that the " dialogue was repeated at sacrifices in honour of the Maruts, or that possibly it was acted by two parties, one representing Indra, the other the Maruts and their followers." [3] Professor Sylvain Lévi [4] supported Max Müller's suggestions and added that the arts of dancing and music were fully developed in the Vedic age. In 1908, Professor von Schroeder extended the ritual theory to support his contention that the Yātrās developed out of the cults of Kṛṣṇa-Viṣṇu and Rudra-Śiva originating from the same root as the Vedic dialogues and monologues.[5] Dr. A. Berriedale Keith,[6] however, in his recent history of the Sanskrit drama, entirely dismisses the ritual theory of the origin of drama in India. He contends that the dramatic rituals associated with Vedic dialogues and hymns are merely liturgical in character and not dramatic at all in the true sense. " The dramas of the ritual, therefore," he thinks, " are in a sense somewhat out of the main line of the development of the drama, and the popular side has survived through the ages in a rough way in the Yātrās well-known in Bengal, while the refined

[1] *The Indian Theatre*, p. 178, footnote.

[2] Dr. von Johnnes Hertel: " Der Ursprung des Indischen Dramas und Epos " : *Vienna Oriental Journal*, vol. xviii, pp. 59 ff. and 137 ff. ; and " Der Suparṇadhyāya cin Vedisches Mysterium " : *Vienna Oriental Journal*, vol. xxiii, pp. 273 ff.).

[3] Max Müller's *Version of the Rg Veda*, vol. i, p. 173.

[4] " Le Théâtre Indien " : *Bibliothèque de l'École des Hautes Études*, Fascicule 83, 1890, pp. 307–8.

[5] " Mysterium und Mimus im Rig Veda." See *Vienna Oriental Journal*, xxii, pp. 223 ff. ; xxxiii, pp. 1 ff. and 270 ff.

[6] *The Sanskrit Drama*, part I, sections 2 and 3, pp. 13–23.

and sacerdotalized Vedic drama passed away without a direct descendant." [1]

The suggestion that the Yātrās of Bengal developed in close connection with the cult of Kṛṣṇa has received very wide support. As early as 1835, Professor Horace Hayman Wilson wrote: "The Yātrā is generally the exhibition of some of the incidents in the youthful life of Krishna, maintained also in extempore dialogue, but interspersed with popular songs." [2] He put the Yātrā in the same category as similar popular dramatic representations of "an inferior description" in the "vernacular dialects" such as the Rāsas [3] of the Western Provinces of India. Lassen mentioned Jaydeb's *Gīta Gobinda* [4] as a characteristic type of the oldest Indian drama and suggested that it may have been recited with appropriate song and dance in the manner of the Rāsa performances.[5] Lassen, however, makes no mention of the Bengali Yātrā. J. L. Klein [6] regards *Gīta Gobinda* as a kind of "divine idyll" or "a Mystery play of the Hindus" and definitely connects it with the Bengali Yātrā and also approves of the suggestion that it was used to represent in suitable costume, song and dance the adventures of Kṛṣṇa's youth.[7] Dr. Niśi Kānta Chaṭṭopādhyāy, one of the first Bengali scholars to investigate the real nature of the Yātrā, developed the theory of its probable origin in the Kṛṣṇa cult into an elaborate thesis [8] and attempted to show its close resemblance with the Mystery plays of the Middle Ages. Professor von Schroeder also mentioned *Gīta Gobinda* as entirely typical of the

[1] *The Sanskrit Drama*, p. 16.

[2] *The Theatre of the Hindus*, vol. i, Introduction, pp. xv-xvi.

[3] "Rāsa" is a variety of ballet in which the heroic and amorous incidents in the life of Kṛṣṇa and Rāma are acted and sung by men and women in appropriate costume and with dramatic gestures.

[4] Jaydeb—one of the earliest of Bengali poets—is supposed to have flourished in the twelfth century B.C., and belonged to the royal court of Lakṣmaṇ Sen. It appears that Vidyāpati and Chaṇḍidās, who belonged to the fourteenth century B.C., both acknowledged him as their literary predecessor. *Gita Gobinda* is a poem in Sanskrit dealing with the love of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā, full of richly poetic imageries and written in exquisitely melodious alliterative verses. For other particulars, see R. C. Datta: *The Literature of Bengal*, pp. 12 ff.; and Rajanī Kānta Gupta: *Jaydeb Charit*.

[5] *Indische Alterthumskunde*, vol. ii, 504–5, and vol. iv, pp. 815–16.

[6] *Geschichte des Dramas*, vol. iii, p. 51.

[7] *Geschichte des Dramas*, vol. i, p. 97.

[8] *The Yātrās or the Popular Dramas of Bengal.*

Bengali Yātrā.[1] In Mr. E. P. Horrwitz's opinion all Yātrās were like "sacred operas . . . frequently produced in connection with the religious processions of the Krishnaists." [2] Professor Sylvain Lévi, in his extremely illuminating survey of the Hindu drama, *Le Théâtre Indien*, fully approves of the view which finds the origin of the Yātrā in Kṛṣṇa worship. He says: "Nées du Krishnaism, les Yātrās sont restées, pendant une carrière déja longue d'une siècle, fidèles à leur inspiration originelle; le divin amant des bergères n'a jamais cessé d'en être le héros préféré." [3] Dr. Karl Mantzius, one of the well known European authorities on drama and stage-craft, finds it "natural to suppose that these popular religious plays mark an earlier stage of development in the Indian drama than the traditional art poems of the Middle Ages, and to draw the conclusion that ancient scenic art was closely connected with the worship of Vishnu." [4] "However," he adds, "we do not yet possess a definite proof that it is so."

Attempts have lately been made to trace the origin of not only the Bengali Yātrā but the entire Sanskrit drama to the Kṛṣṇa-Viṣṇu cult. In 1899, Professor Macdonell made the following interesting observations: "Indian tradition describes Bharata as having caused to be acted before the Gods a play representing the 'svayamvara' of Laksmi, wife of Vishnu. Tradition further makes Krishna and his cowherdesses the starting point of 'Saṁgita,' a representation consisting of a mixture of song, music, and dancing. The 'Gitagovinda' is concerned with Krishna and the modern Yātrās generally represent scenes from the life of that deity. From all this it seems likely that the Indian drama was developed in connection with the cult of Vishnu-Krishna, and that the earliest acted representations were, therefore, like the Mysteries of the Christian Middle Ages, a kind of religious plays, in which scenes from the legend of the God were enacted mainly with the aid of song and dance, supplemented with prose dialogue improvised by the performers." [5]

[1] "Der Gitagovinda ist geradzu nichts als eine verfeinerte Yātrā": *Indiens Literatur und Cultur in Historischer Entwicklung*, p. 580.
[2] *The Indian Theatre*, p. 178. [3] *Le Théâtre Indien*, p. 394.
[4] *A History of Theatrical Art in Ancient and Modern Times*, vol. i, p. 4.
[5] *History of Sanskrit Literature*, p. 347.

Professor Macdonell's suggestions, though apparently based upon conjectural and untrustworthy evidence, have found vigorous approval from many modern scholars who have tried to supplement them with more accurate and historical data. Professor Keith, who does not think it probable that drama could have originated in the Vedic period, believes, on the contrary, that it must have developed in connection with Kṛṣṇa-Viṣṇu worship at a much later period of Hindu history and that it was through the use of epic recitations "the latent possibilities of drama were evoked and the literary form created." [1] Professor Keith rests his view mainly on a passage in the *Mahābhāṣya* of the famous Indian grammarian Patañjali. In this passage Patañjali is elucidating the meaning of the comment, made by Kātyāyana on Pāṇini's rule (III. i. 26) which permits one to describe past events as if they were present. Patañjali says that such a rule is justifiable, because the acts though not actually being done at the moment, are being vividly described. For example, when we say, "He causes the death of Kaṅśa," or "He causes the binding of Balī," we are speaking of things belonging to remote past and yet things which may be set forth vividly in one of the following three ways: firstly, the Śobhanikās or Śaubhikās [2] represent acts like the killing of Kaṅśa or binding of Balī in dumb pantomine or tableaux; secondly, the painters draw pictures, describing such scenes on canvas; thirdly, the Granthikās, dividing themselves into two parties, one on the side of Kṛṣṇa and the other on that of Kaṅśa, and wearing two different colours like red and black, tell in words the various incidents connected with the story. So this explanation of Patañjali's passage in the *Mahābhāṣya* proves the existence of drama in India, at least in some rudimentary form, as far back as 140 B.C., which is commonly believed to be

[1] *The Sanskrit Drama*, p. 27.

[2] Professor Lüders takes the view that Śaubhikās used *only* to explain shadow plays to the audience (see *Sitzungsberichte der Königl. Akademie der Wissen Schaften zu Berlin*, 1916, pp. 698 ff.), and Professor Winternitz is in agreement with Professor Lüders' interpretation. (See *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft*, lxxiv, pp. 118 ff.) Professor Sylvain Lévi thinks that the Śaubhikās were those who taught actors play-acting, recitation, etc. (See *Le Théâtre Indien*, p. 305.) Our explanation, however, follows the view first adduced by Weber (*Indische Studien*, chap. xiii, pp. 293–496) and later supported by Dr. Keith (*The Sanskrit Drama*, pp. 32 ff.).

the time when Patañjali flourished.[1] We have to suppose, therefore, that not only pantomimic acting but recitations and dialogues, distributed between two groups, adhering to their respective heroes, were quite common in ancient India and that the Kṛṣṇa-Kaṅśa legend was one of the subjects of such performances. Professor Keith would, therefore, have us believe that Kṛṣṇa-worship must have given the decisive impulse to the creation of dramatic art in India. "The balance of probability," he remarks in conclusion, "is that the Sanskrit drama came into being shortly after, if not before, the middle of the second century B.C., and that it was evoked by the combination of epic recitations with the dramatic moment of the Kṛṣṇa legend, in which a young god strives against, and overcomes enemies."[2] Dr. William Ridgeway[3] further supports the theory of the probable origin of the Indian drama in Kṛṣṇa-worship, but his contentions are only a part of a much wider thesis, viz., the animistic theory of all dramatic origins. He avers that "wide induction leads irresistibly to the conclusion that tragedy and serious drama, wherever they are found under the sun, have their roots in the world-wide belief in the continued existence of the soul after the death of the body."[4] Dr. Ridgeway's theory that all drama in its beginnings is bound up with primitive reverence for the dead and funeral rites and ceremonies, when applied to the real origin of the drama in India, is open to many serious objections.[5] We do not wish to minimize the importance of the so-called dramatic elements in Vedic ritual as suggested by the dialogue-hymns, nor can we completely ignore the influence of epic recitations on the development of the Indian drama. Mimetic and pantomimic dancing of a religious character may quite conceivably have been closely associated with the beginnings of drama in India and may also have played a prominent part in the worship of

[1] It may be mentioned in this connection that even much earlier than Patañjali's time, Pāṇini, about the fourth century B.C., in the rule (iv. 3. 110–11) which he laid down for the formation of words like Śailālin and Kṛśāśvin, refers to text-books for Naṭas (Naṭasūtras) ascribed to Śilālin and Kṛśāśva. It is quite possible, however, that Pāṇini's use of the term "Naṭa" did not particularly mean anything connected with "drama" in its proper sense.

[2] *The Sanskrit Drama*, p. 45.

[3] *Dramas and Dramatic Dances of non-European Races*, pp. 153 and 156–7.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 385. [5] See A. B. Keith, *The Sanskrit Drama*, pp. 46–9.

Kṛṣṇa. But the assumption that one particular legend or the ritual in connection with only one particular Hindu god, being combined with sacred music and recitative dialogues, gave rise to the Indian drama, cannot be accepted as wholly satisfactory. Moreover, we know that the god Śiva has always occupied a very prominent place in Hindu religious life and practice. In the earliest Vedic sacrificial rituals he is a fire-god, and has a special place assigned to him. He appears as a human being in the *Mahābhārata*, the most noteworthy reference being where Arjuna fights Śiva, disguised as a mountaineer, to obtain his immortal weapon "pāśupata" (i.e. belonging to Paśupati or Śiva). He is again mentioned in the *Mahābhārata* as a lover of feasts and "tāṇḍava" (violent) and "lāsya" (tender and seductive) dances. He is attended in his dances by a host of goblins and ghosts, called "pramathas" who play with drums called "ḍamaru." In the *Rāmāyaṇa*, he is discovered as a porter at the gate of Rāvaṇa, the Rākṣasa king, and also as guarding the tents during the Kurukṣetra war. Śiva emerges from the epics as a popular god, festivals in whose honour are frequently held with dancing, music and wine. Later, he becomes the exclusive object of worship of a particular sect. The poets Śūdraka and Śrī Harṣa adore him in the prefaces to their various plays. In *Mālavikāgnimitra* of Kālidāsa, a dancing-master refers to Śiva as the creator of dancing, and to the sect of Paśupats who worship him with mimetic dance and song. In the Tantras, the Śiva ceremonial consists of his representation as the lord of creation by men, and of the representation of his spouse, Śakti, the female energy, by women. The part that Rāma has also played in the growth of Indian literary and religious thought is by no means inferior to that of Kṛṣṇa himself. The recitation of the *Rāmāyaṇa* during religious festivals, and the semi-dramatic representation known as Rāma-Līlā are popular throughout India. The influence of Buddhism, Jainism and other important religious sects has also to be reckoned with in a complete study of the religious origins of the Indian drama. It seems hopeless, in view of the utter uncertainty of historical dates and events, to arrive at any definite conclusions concerning the real age or origin of the drama in India or the precise religious and secular forces that contributed to its growth and development.

CHAPTER II

The Origin of the Yātrā

If we carefully examine all the older and more primitive forms of dramatic art, even in peoples very far removed from each other geographically and ethnologically, we notice that "drama" in its first stage arises almost invariably from mimetic song and dancing as integral parts of some religious or secular rites. It is quite obvious that the Yātrās, as we find them to-day, did not owe their origin mainly to the desire for amusements of a secular nature nor were they entirely the outcome of religious ritual. The name "yātrā" literally means a "procession." A "yātrā" originally may have been such a procession as was customary with worshippers and devotees at the time of the regular festivals of their own god or cult. Some kind of musical performance and sympathetic dancing must have formed a part of the procession. Even when the "yātrā" no longer remained rigidly connected with religious ceremonies at a regular place of worship, it was still called by its original name, "procession." Professor Sylvain Lévi observed: "Associés aux processions (Yātrās) du culte ces spectacles en prirent le nom, et ils le gardèrent encore après s'être détachés des cérémonies réligieuses pour mener une existence indépendente."[1] Though one may trace a close connection between primitive drama and music and religious ritual in all countries, it should not be forgotten that the Yātrās of Bengal differ in many important characteristics from all other varieties of dramatic representation, whether ancient or modern, and whether in the east or west. The difference lies not so much in the actual types of plays represented by the Yātrās as in the specific circumstances under which the performances used to take place and still take place. We will go into this question in greater detail in subsequent chapters.[2] The main difficulty in the way of arriving at definite

[1] *Le Théâtre Indien*, p. 394.
[2] See Chaps. IV and V, pp. 20–30.

conclusions in regard to the actual sources of the Yātrā is the total absence of a chronological history of the older Yātrās and their writers. The existing specimens belong to a much later period from 1800 downwards. If we were in possession of a really authentic list of all the Yātrās, whether still in existence or not, we could have surmised something about their true nature and also the earlier methods of their production. It is quite probable that at a very early stage the Yātrāwālās used to extemporise the music and words of the plays to suit a specific religious festival or social entertainment and that they made no serious attempt at literary composition or publication. We have also no means of discovering whether the religious festivals with which the Yātrās were so closely associated in the beginning, are in any way similar to those held in ancient India in honour of the various gods and goddesses. In fact, we know only very little about the so-called "dramatic" festivals of ancient times. The account of alleged "dramatic spectacles" exhibited before the two disciples of Buddha, given in the early Buddhist literature and mentioned by Csoma Körösi,[1] does not throw any real light upon the problem of historical sequence. In the third century B.C. Megasthenes speaks of the cult of Śiva "as being very predominant among the inhabitants of the mountains who wreathed, annointed, carrying bells and cymbals, followed their kings during the festivals of this god."[2] The same writer describes how the Indo-Aryans belonging to the mountains "worshipped Dionysus or Śiva while those of the plain Heracles or Vishnu, and indeed quite especially in his incarnation as Krishna."[3] Another historian tells us: "In the *Mahābhārata* which, however, in its existing redaction, is conceived in the interest of Vishnuism, the cultus which we find most widely spread is that of Çiva. He is the Dionysus of Megasthenes, who relates that he was

[1] *Asiatic Researches*, xx, 50. See also Weber, *Indische Litteraturgeschichte*, p. 217. Also Lassen, *Indische Alterthumskunde*, vol. ii, p. 502.

[2] *Indische Alterthumskunde*, vol. ii, pp. 690 and 698.

[3] *Indische Alterthumskunde*, vol. iii, p. 453; see also vol. i, pp. 795 and 925. Cf. Megasthenes, *Indica*, p. 135, ed. by Schwanbeck. Lassen's interpretation of the passage from Megasthenes has been contested by A. Weber (*Indische Studien*, ii, p. 409).

worshipped especially upon the mountains, the rival cultus of Heracles or Krishna being thenceforth dominant in the plains of the Ganges." [1] Dr. Niśi Kānta Chaṭṭopādhyāy has attempted to prove that all these religious festivals to which references are found in ancient Indian history partook of the nature of the Bengali Yātrās and were as well their real precursors.[2] This is, of course, extremely conjectural. There is no doubt that religious festivals in the form of dramatic pantomimes used to be performed in ancient India in connection with various popular gods and heroes, but certainly there is no historical evidence to prove a continuous evolution of these festivals or these spectacular performances. Lassen seems to have taken the right view in regard to this whole question: "There cannot be anything contrary to the supposition that similar festivals with similar representations were also celebrated at a much earlier period, although it must be reserved to further researches to show how early this was and of what nature these festivals really were." [3]

The contention that the Yātrā developed entirely or mainly in connection with the cult or worship of Kṛṣṇa is open to objection on some very simple and obvious grounds. Firstly, the historical facts and literary data which generally give rise to this theory are quite insufficient and one-sided. For instance, Dr. Niśi Kānta Chaṭṭopādhyāy attempts to prove it [4] by a very exclusive treatment of a handful of Kṛṣṇa-Yātrās of only one well-known Yātrāwālā, Kṛṣṇa Kamal Gosvāmī, published between 1860–71. Secondly, the repeated and persistent mention of Jaydeb's *Gīta Gobinda*, as if it were a Bengali Yātrā, has led the champions of the Kṛṣṇāite origin of the Yātrā into obvious mistakes. *Gīta Gobinda* is not a Bengali drama; it is written in Sanskrit. Although it presents some traits of resemblance with some of the Kṛṣṇa-Yātrās, it can hardly be regarded as a representative of the Bengali Yātrā proper. It is quite true that Bengal has for a long time been the stronghold of Vaiṣṇava thoughts and ideas and that the religious and

[1] A. Barth, *The Religions of India*, trans. by J. Wood (1882), p. 163.
[2] *The Yātrās or The Popular Dramas of Bengal*, pp. 45 ff.
[3] *Indische Alterthumskunde*, chap. ii, p. 505.
[4] See *The Yātrās or The Popular Dramas of Bengal*, pp. 2 ff.

aesthetic movements started by Chaitanya and his companions, have influenced Bengali life and literature to an enormous extent. But it should not be forgotten that religion of many forms and cults is inseparably connected with the life of the Hindus. The historian Barth bears witness to "the religious ardour with which the militant parties of the different sects maintain the exclusive title of their god to supremacy and adoration."[1] We know that in Bengal as well as in other parts of India, the cult of Śiva flourished side by side with the cult of Kṛṣṇa, and in fact, in point of historical time, the Śiva cult is believed to have preceded the Kṛṣṇa-cult.[2] In the pre-Muhammadan period of Bengali history, Śaivism grew up as a strong religious power, combated Buddhism, and succeeded in reviving and reinstating Hinduism in Bengal. It was not until much later, during the time of the Paurāṇic Renaissance in Bengal that Śaivism declined and was overshadowed by the new Śākta-cult.[3] An old Bengali journal named "Soma Prakāś" is mentioned [4] as having contained a statement to the effect that the Yātrās that were in existence long before the coming of Chaitanya depended, almost without exception, on Śākta subjects and at that time the Kṛṣṇa-Yātrā was not even heard of. The Śākta cult, which in Bengal for the most part consists in the worship of the "Divine Mother" in the form of the goddess Kālī or Durgā or any of her other incarnations such as Chaṇḍī or Manasā, found its most characteristic expression in the popular Chaṇḍī-Yātrās and Bhāsān-Yātrās. Most likely the Chaṇḍī-Yātrā grew out of a very old type of musical performance called Chaṇḍīr Gān (The Song of Chaṇḍī). The best specimens of the Chaṇḍī-Yātrā in Bengal are those by Guru Prasād Ballabh of Farāsḍāṅgā. The Bhāsān-Yātrā is usually connected with the annual festival of Manasā Devī in the villages of lower Bengal. The festival is both social and religious. Boat races and 'melā's (village fairs) are held during the day and at

[1] *The Religions of India*, p. 183.

[2] See D. C. Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature*, pp. 63–73 and 235–50.

[3] *Ibid.*, pp. 252–362.

[4] See Amarendra Nāth Rāy's article entitled "Yātrā Kathā" in the first number of *Rup o Raṅga*, 1321 B.S. (A.D. 1914–15).

night the worshippers keep vigil, and chant poems before the temple of the goddess. The songs are taken from the popular stories connected with Behulā and Phullarā and also from the events in the life of Chaṁd Saodāgar (Chaṁd, the merchant) who, having fallen under the wrath of Manasā for defying her, wanders in many lands and is ultimately driven by strange circumstances to worship her. Bhāsān-Yātrās produced by Lāusen Baṛāl were among the best of their kind.[1] The cult of Śiva was also represented by those popular plays which dealt with the domestic scenes on Mount Kailās, the mythical abode of Śiva. Mr. Binay Kumār Sarkār [2] gives us an interesting account of an ancient Hindu institution, partly religious and partly dramatic, known as the Gambhīrā festival, which is entirely connected with the cult and worship of Śiva. It used to be held in honour of Śiva regularly every year in different parts of Bengal, Assam and Orissa. Mr. Sarkār thinks that " to a certain extent, the literature of the Gambhīrā-cycles may be compared with the Mystery and Miracle plays in old English and *No*-plays of Japan." [3] Mr. Sarkār traces the origin of the Gambhīrā institution from the very earliest times through the Vedas, epics, Buddhistic literature and the records of Hiuen Tsang, indicates the total extent of the geographical area through which it actually spread, deals with the dramatic devices and methods by which it was presented to the people, and points out its influence upon Bengali culture and folk-arts. Mr. Sarkār says, " The educative influence of such agencies as popular festivals is very well illustrated by their effects upon the literature, arts, industries, morals, and public spirit of the people who took part in this socio-religious ceremony in connection with the worship of Śiva." [4] Besides the Śaiva and Śākta Yātrās, there actually existed in Bengal many other different varieties of Yātrā such as the Rāma-Yātrā and Vidyā-Sundar Yātrā which were also very widely popular in their own time. Jay Chandra, Prem Chāṁd and Ānanda were well-known Adhikārīs or Yātrāwālās,

[1] For a fuller account of the cult of Manasā Devī, the folk literature connected with her, and the places where festivals are still regularly held in her honour, see D. C. Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature*, pp. 256 ff.

[2] *The Folk-Element in Hindu Culture*, pp. 14 ff.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 20.

[4] *Ibid.*, pp. 14–15.

who became renowned in Bengal by their productions of the Rāma Yātrā. Gopāl Uṛiyā (1819–59) was the foremost among the producers of the Vidyā-Sundar-Yātrā. The songs and dances of Hīrā, a flower-girl, constituted the chief feature of all Vidyā-Sundar-Yātrās.[1] The existence of Yātrās other than Kṛṣṇa-Yātrās before the latter appeared in Bengal cannot, therefore, be doubted. Even Kṛṣṇa Kamal Gosvāmī, to whose Yātrās Dr. Niśi Kānta Chaṭṭopādhyāy specifically refers, remarks[2] that numerous plays based on the epics were existent in his own time, and the reason why he himself thought of writing some Kṛṣṇa-Yātrās was that he found the others either too learned for ordinary people or too much vitiated by obscenity. Kṛṣṇa Kamal (1810–88) is perhaps the most renowned of all the reformers of the Yātrā. The Kṛṣṇa-Yātrā in Bengal owes its increasing popularity and refinement almost entirely to Kṛṣṇa Kamal. His first Yātrā, called *Svapna Bilās* (Dream Pleasure) was composed about 1835. It was performed immediately by several Yātrā-parties in Dacca. It was published some years later and had an amazing circulation. In a preface to his second production named *Bichitra Bilās* (The Amour Wonderful), Kṛṣṇa Kamal wrote about *Svapna Bilās* : " The public probably liked the work ; otherwise why should there be a sale of 20,000 copies in such a short time ? " *Rāi Unmādinī* (The Frenzied Rādhā) which came after *Bichitra Bilās*, is perhaps his best and most finished Yātrā. His other minor Yātrās are *Bharat Milan* (The Meeting with Bharat), *Nimāi Sanyās* (The Renunciation of Nimāi), and *Goṣṭha* (A Pastoral Idyll). Except *Bharat Milan*, in which the episode of the meeting of Bharat and Rāmā when Bharat implores Rāmā to come back to Ayodhyā, is taken from the *Mahābhārata*, all the Yātrās of Kṛṣṇa Kamal deal with incidents in the life of Kṛṣṇa in Bṛndāban. His Kṛṣṇa-Yātrās were, as a rule, characterized by a strong emotional lyricism and the moral earnestness of a true Vaiṣṇav. The Kṛṣṇa-Yātrā was developed and popularized by a host of other writers and producers, both before and after Kṛṣṇa Kamal.

[1] A very interesting account of the Vidyā-Sundar Yātrās in Bengal appeared in Sañjīb Chandra Chatterji's *Yātrā-Samālochanā* (A critical review of the Yātrā), Calcutta, 1907.

[2] See *The Collected Works of Kṛṣṇa Kamal Gosvāmī*, 2nd ed., pp. 179–80.

The name of Śiśurām Adhikārī will always be remembered as one of the ablest and most successful producers of the Kṛṣṇa-Yātrā. He was a contemporary of Rām Prasād (1718–75) and Bhārat Chandra (1722–60). An account of him appears in Rājendra Lāl Mitra's *Bibidhārtha Saṁgraha.*[1] The improvements Śiśurām introduced into the Yātrā were later carried on by his well-known disciple Śrīdām-Subal. Śrīdām-Subal also found a very worthy successor in Paramānanda Dās. At the time of Paramānanda and his contemporary Prem Chāṁd of Vidyā-Sundar-Yātrā fame, the Kṛṣṇa-Yātrā reached its high-water mark. Paramānanda introduced a new feature into the songs well known as "tukko" (which means the turning of the last part of a song written in *payār* style into a *kīrtan* ending), which became very popular. After Paramānanda's death, his mantle fell on Gobinda Adhikārī (1798–1870). Besides being a good producer, Gobinda was an original composer of songs, most of which were written in alliterative verse. Gobinda discarded his master's "tukko" style of singing which was, however, revived later by his own disciple Badan. After the death of Badan, the Yātrā began to decline in Bengal. The tradition was, however, carried on by inferior men like Brajanāth and Nīlkaṇṭha but they were unable to save the Yātrā from its inevitable fate. It is quite evident that the later improved tone and healthier development of the Yātrā came as a direct result of the Vaiṣṇava revival under Chaitanya and his followers. Its gradual growth and expansion went hand in hand with the dissemination of the cult of Kṛṣṇa. In fact, there actually came in the history of popular dramatic representations in Bengal a time when the Kṛṣṇa-Yātrā overshadowed all others and became the most convenient instrument in the hands of the Vaiṣṇavas to propagate their ideas amongst the masses.

From the above brief survey of the different varieties of the Bengali Yātrās, it appears quite clearly that the theme of a Yātrā was by no means necessarily taken from the life and adventures of Kṛṣṇa, but was quite as often adapted from the

[1] Mentioned by Mr. Amarendra Nāth Rāy. See *Rüp o Raṅga*, first number, 1331 B.S. (A.D. 1924–25), p. 19.

Rāmāyaṇa and *Mahābhārata*, Paurāṇic legends, folk-tales, and mythology. Professor Sylvain Lévi, while speaking of the very wide range of topics dealt with in the Yātrās, observes: "Les auteurs ne sont pas interdit toutefois de sortir du cycle Krishnaite; ils ont emprunté sans scruple leurs sujets au *Mahābhārata* et au *Rāmāyaṇa* . . . le çivaisme même a prété parfois ses divinités et ses légendes: témoin les amours de Çiva et Pârvati." [1] Sir J. H. Marshall [2] gives us a very interesting descriptive list of the various existing types of dramatic representations in India. It shows a large quantity of different themes which are adopted for the various performances and the many religious cults and institutions with which these are associated. There is no doubt that in Bengal, as elsewhere, the different social and religious institutions largely contributed to the development of literature and fine arts. As a matter of fact, at no point of their literary or religious history did the people of Bengal completely neglect or forget to celebrate in song, drama, poetry or ritual their innumerable gods and goddesses.[3] A country like Bengal which is so old may quite reasonably claim to have a history or at least a legendary past of its own, the most important events of which will naturally have been utilized in a suitable manner for purposes of popular entertainment and instruction. It may be concluded, therefore, that the popular plays like the Yātrā did not necessarily confine themselves to the worship and cult of Kṛṣṇa or draw their inspiration only from the literature or history that gathered round this god, but drew freely from the Purāṇas and mythology, folk-legends and epic stories and, in fact, from every possible indigenous source.

The Bengali Yātrā may be regarded then as a kind of community drama originating in the religious worship of the various

[1] *Le Théâtre Indien*, p. 394.

[2] See Dr. William Ridgeway's *Dramas and Dramatic Dances of non-European Races*, pp. 172–210.

[3] "The Hindu tendency to deify the energies, nature-forces, or personal attributes or emotions has constructed all the gods and goddesses of India, practically speaking, as so many embodiments of the various phases of the country itself and of the culture it has developed through the ages. And the invention of deities has not yet ceased."—Mr. B. K. Sarkar, *Folk-Element in Hindu Culture*, p. 260.

gods and goddesses of antiquity and serving as a convenient medium through which the religious and social ideas and feelings appropriate to the different festivals and holidays, found a natural expression. Divine worship as a whole suggested the possibilities of dramatic representation, for which the epics and folk-literature gave characters, and the ancient mythology and Purāṇas furnished stories. In fact, no other type of popular drama has sprung so directly out of the peculiar conditions of Bengali life, nor has any other form of play developed in such definite and close connection with the distinctive æsthetic ideas and religious beliefs of the Bengali people. The merits and defects of the Yātrā can be fully understood only if we bear in mind the essential characteristics of Bengali culture and the particular temperament and sentiments to which it has always appealed. To the entire rural Bengali community, the Yātrās have been as familiar as their daily routine of life, acquainted as they are with all the traditional stories with which these plays deal. They recognize their heroes of history and legend as soon as they appear in a play and they accept from generation to generation, without the slightest demur, all the old tales of romance and mythology exactly in the way these are presented and interpreted to them through the Yātrās.[1] The Yātrās most clearly demonstrate what a firm hold the Purāṇas, epics and mythology of the past have retained on the minds of the Bengali people. We are not, therefore, surprised in the least that the dramatic devices and methods of the Yātrā should have remained pretty much the same for ages, and that the successive playwrights and Yātrāwālās should have utilized the same stories over and over again.

[1] It may be mentioned in this connection that Aristotle approved of the choice of legendary themes for the Attic drama because of the inherent Greek faith in the mythology of the country and its intimate connection with the traditional history of the people.—See *Poetics*, C 9.

CHAPTER III

The Yātrā and the Early European Drama

The existence of certain noticeable points of similarity between the Yātrā and the early European drama has been suggested. The Attic drama, unmistakably born beside the altar, grew out of the worship of Dionysus. The Morality plays and the early English liturgical dramas were also connected with the religious rituals of Catholic Christianity and the life and legends of Christ and the Saints. Religious worship apparently seems to have been the mainspring of inspiration for the beginnings of the dramatic art both in Bengal and in Europe. Dr. Mantzius remarks that the ancient Greek drama is "so poetical and perfect in form" that it "does not differ essentially from the religious festivals of the Indians of the North-West and that the masques and farces which are still performed in civilized Europe find analogies, for instance, among the Melanesian peoples or inhabitants of the South Sea Islands."[1] The fact that music, dancing, religious worship and mimetic art constitute the most convenient medium through which all primitive peoples expressed themselves in the very early stages of their culture, does not necessarily prove the theory of a similar origin of their respective dramatic arts. To find exactly what these affinities between the dramas of different countries signify, is quite a complicated problem for the student of comparative drama. No amount of historical facts would be really sufficient to enable one to settle the question satisfactorily. The literary and historical evolution of the English or Attic drama is entirely different from that of the Bengali drama. Beginning in ritual and religious worship, the European drama during the last twenty centuries has passed through changes so extraordinary and complete that but for a

[1] *A History of Theatrical Art in Ancient and Modern Times*, Introduction, p. 5.

few essential characteristics we would not be able to recognize what it originally was.

Dr. Niśi Kānta Chaṭṭopādhyāy's conjecture [1] that the Bengali Yātrās occupy the same position in the development of the Indian drama as the Miracle plays in that of the European drama cannot be substantiated by historical facts. His main contention, however, is that the Yātrās deal with the three periods of Kṛṣṇa's life—infancy, youth, and manhood—just as the mediæval Mysteries are composed of three parts, known as passio, sepultura, and resurrectio. It is quite true that one or two Kṛṣṇa-Yātrās may occasionally be found to deal with the three periods of Kṛṣṇa's life, but the Kṛṣṇa-Yātrā, as a rule, knows nothing about such divisions. When such is the case with the Kṛṣṇa-Yātrā, Dr. Chaṭṭopādhyāy's assumption can hardly be accepted as true of the Bengali Yātrā as a whole. The point is that the introduction of exactly three periods of Kṛṣṇa's life into a Yātrā is neither a strict convention of dramatic technique nor is it required by any fixed laws of drama, as in the case of the Mysteries. Dr. Chaṭṭopādhyāy also argues [2] that the Yātrās were originally composed by Brāhmaṇ ecclesiastics in the same way as the Christian Mysteries by abbots and deans. His argument rests solely upon the consideration of a couple of Kṛṣṇa-Yātrās, written undoubtedly by a Brāhmaṇ priest, Kṛṣṇa Kamal Gosvāmī. From all that we know about the history of the Bengali Yātrā, it does not seem probable that the actual composition or production of a Yātrā was originally or, indeed, ever confined to one particular caste or class in Bengal.[3] Even judging from the few Yātrās that

[1] *The Yātrās or The Popular Dramas of Bengal*, pp. 35 ff.

[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 45 ff.

[3] The following extract from *Young India*, dated 11th December, 1924 (vol. vi, No. 50), is of special value in this connection : " In Chittagong a famous musician was born in our village about ninety-five years ago. He held a very high position in our society. Though it is fifty years ago since he died, his name is still enshrined in the hearts of the people. . . . He founded a Jātrā-party with young men of ' ḍom ' class, the lowest in the Hindu society. In the ' majlis ' of Brahmans and other higher caste people they would play their parts. Since then the actors and singers are recruited from high and low classes and they work together without objection."—Babu Kālīśaṅkar Chakrabarti's letter to Mr. C. F. Andrews, quoted in the latter's article entitled " Can Untouchability be Defended ? "

are still extant and those that we have information about, it is sufficiently clear that the writers and producers were by no means always priests or religious dignitaries. The Yātrā, originating as it did in connection with religious worship, may have been from time to time patronized by Brāhmaṇ priests, but it was quite firmly established, almost from the beginning of its career, in the social and religious life of the people and was, in fact, a common possession of the entire Bengali community.

CHAPTER IV

The Yātrā as Acted

Let us now consider the Yātrā as an acted play and see how it is presented to an audience. The *mise-en-scène* of a Yātrā performance is simplicity itself. It is not produced upon a permanent stage and it does not require any curtains or much scenery. If performed indoors, it takes place in a large hall called "Nāṭ Mandir" (Hall of Music and Dance), which usually belongs to some well-to-do zamindar or influential person. But more frequently it takes place in the open air under a large temporary canopy, which is called "Sabhā-Maṇḍap" (Pavilion). On the ground are spread several large-sized rugs, carpets or bamboo-mats on which members of the audience sit packed closely together. A little square arena called "Raṅga-Bhūmi" (Actor's Enclosure) is marked off in the middle of the assembly. The only decoration is perhaps a plain curtain tied with strings in one corner of the hall or "Sabhā-Maṇḍap."[1] The space behind the curtain serves as a kind of dressing-room (Sāj-Ghar). Sometimes it is even quite insufficiently screened. For instance, one may often notice an actor throwing away his falses and wigs or dressing up as a female character almost in full view of the audience. A narrow passage leading from the "Sāj-Ghar" to the "Raṅga-Bhūmi" is usually kept for the actors to enter or leave. A wooden chair, covered with a piece of embroidered or coloured silk, is set apart for the royal throne and may also be used by any other high State official or religious dignitary appearing in the

[1] In modern times, however, large canopies and tapestries, beautiful chandeliers and canvas paintings have begun to replace the old articles of decoration. If a performance happens to take place on the premises of a very rich man, the spectators may be treated from time to time to sprays of rose-water from gold or silver syringes.

play. Sometimes small chairs, stools or tables are used to give the impression of a room, if necessary. The actors remain on the stage while these accessories are being brought, removed or altered so as to suggest that they are moving from one place to another. Sometimes the change of scenes is explained by simple declarations from the players themselves and these are put in normally as a part of the dialogue. The players stand facing the audience. Real dramatic incidents like the shutting of a door, entering a house or riding on a horse or in a vehicle are either simulated or mentioned by the actors themselves. Female rôles are represented by men, because social custom and public sentiment forbid women to take part in a public performance. One actor may appear in a number of parts in succession and occasionally the same person even appears both as a man and as a woman in the same play. The audience is quite prepared to overlook some of the inevitable incongruities resulting from such limitations. For example, one or two unmistakable remnants of things which were necessary for a female part may still be noticed on the person of an actor, wearing a beard or a moustache, who has just before appeared as a woman. Whatever the defects inherent in artless performances of this nature may be, the simplicity with which they are presented excites the imagination of the audience. They imagine themselves seeing or hearing things which are not capable of being acted with such imperfect stage accessories. They do not for a moment withdraw their attention from that little unpretentious centre of the acted drama, the "Raṅga-Bhūmi," where there is always something going on. The elaborate devices of our modern stage-machinery, if introduced into these Yātrās, would perhaps hinder, instead of helping, the naïve imagination of such an unsophisticated audience.

The play lasts practically all night, starting early in the evening. Sometimes it is not finished until five or six o'clock next morning. Nowadays, however, the practice of beginning the performance sometime about mid-day and finishing it before midnight is being generally adopted. The place is lighted by *sārās* or small earthen cups placed on the tops of bamboo posts with wicks soaked in mustard oil. Torches fastened to the end

of sticks are also used.[1] The play begins with music performed by a regular concert-party and for the lack of a more suitable word we may describe it as "orchestral" music. For a long time music used to consist of a perpetual beating of the deep-toned "khols"[2] and clashing of the "karatāls."[3] In recent times, however, the so-called "orchestra" is usually composed of well-trained and efficient musicians who use a variety of brass and stringed instruments. The music may continue for a couple of hours before the play actually opens. This incredibly long overture tends to produce a kind of stupor in those who endure it, and it is not often unusual for some of the less patient among the audience to creep out into the street or under the shade of a tree, more dead than alive from sheer physical and mental exhaustion.

When the instrumental music is over, the performance, as a rule, starts with a kind of musical prologue called "Prastābanā" which contains a hymn in honour of the deity who presides over the play. This chant is called "Bandanā" (Salutation Song). The old-fashioned Yātrās are strictly modelled on the pattern of the Sanskrit drama. They have a "Pūrbaraṅga" (Introduction), followed by a "Nāndī" (Argument) introduced by the Adhikārī (Stage Manager, an exact counterpart of the Sanskrit "Sūtradhar") and then the usual Naṭ-Naṭī (Dancers) scenes. But some of the more modern Yātrās do not follow the rules of the Sanskrit drama, but use the more convenient plan of dividing and subdividing the play into acts and scenes.

[1] Now, however, in a modern Yātrā performance either kerosene or gas lamps or even electricity will be used to light the "Sabhā-Maṇḍap." Coloured torches are frequently employed to enhance the effect of dancing and gaudy court-scenes.

[2] "Khol" is a kind of Indian drum, played simultaneously with both hands, one on either side of it, and hung by means of a chain around the neck and under the arms of the player.

[3] "Karatāls" are cymbals.

CHAPTER V

The Characteristics of the Yātrā

The Yātrā, whether ancient or modern, is a combination of two elements—the dramatic and the lyric. The dramatic part consists of dialogues and monologues setting forth a plot and interspersed with serious and comic episodes. The lyrical part is practically two-thirds of the performance. It consists of innumerable songs scattered right through the play. The hero sings, the villain sings, and in fact, all the *dramatis personæ* sing on the slightest provocation. The singing in the Yātrā is entrusted to a group of ten or twelve boys known as "Juṛī."[1] The training of these boys begins at a very early age and the possession of a strong, high soprano voice is considered indispensable. The "Juṛī" perform in a rather rough way the same purpose as a Greek Chorus and act as a sort of link between the dramatic and musical parts of the play. The "Juṛī", as a rule, never take any direct part in the performance; they are, as it were, a part of the audience thinking aloud. Sometimes dressed as shepherd boys, sometimes as young maidens, and quite frequently as court-singers, they express in song the feelings intended to be aroused in the audience by such incidents as death, victory and fulfilled or unfulfilled love. Sometimes their songs also narrate certain events which have happened previously or episodes which cannot be adequately represented on the stage. The members of the "Juṛī" divide themselves into four groups each containing two or three singers. Each group faces the audience at one of the four sides of the square-shaped "Raṅga-Bhūmi," singing the same song in chorus. The leader of the "Juṛī," the "master-singer" as he is called, stands behind in the centre of these groups and plays his violin. From time to time he encourages the boys with words of appreciation from

[1] The word "Juṛī" literally means a "pair". It is now used in a collective sense to denote the whole party of boy-singers. It may occasionally mean a pair of such singers or it may be also used for a single member of a "Juṛī" party.

behind. If ever he is displeased for any reason with any of the singers, which quite often happens as one goes out of tune or another does not sing loud enough, he boxes one by the ears or smartly spanks the other, much to the amusement of the whole audience.

The song element preponderates not only in the Yātrās but in almost all the older types of dramatic and semi-dramatic performances in Bengal. The popular displays of logomachy such as *Kabis* and the *Pāṁchālis*, the ballad recitations like the *Kathakatā*, the semi-religious musical performances such as the *Ṭappā* and the *Kīrtan* and the multifarious forms of rural entertainment like the *Hāp-ākhṛāis*—all at one time enjoyed enormous popularity in Bengal. We give here a brief account of each of these performances which are so closely allied to the Yātrā :—

Kabi—Originally Kabi-songs formed a part of the Yātrā. Later they were made into a separate class of songs sung by professional minstrels, called Kabiwālās. A Kabi-party generally consisted of both men and women, and was divided into two groups, each singing in chorus. The singers were known as "Daṇḍa-Kabis." The leaders extemporized the words of the songs, which were accompanied by musicians playing on the "Maṇḍala." The Kabiwālās had no higher ambition than that of pleasing their rustic patrons by clever impromptu attacks on each other. Naturally Kabi-songs, though containing a good deal of poetic charm, never attained any high degree of literary excellence. At a later stage, a great rivalry arose between the different parties of Kabiwālās and the songs degenerated into mere personal abuse and vituperation. The existence of Kabi-performances can be traced as far back as the seventeenth century. Raghu Nāth, a cobbler, is amongst the earliest known Kabiwālā. Rām Basu (1786–1813), Nityānanda Bairāgī (1751–1821) and Haru Ṭhākur (1738–1813) are the best known. The earlier Kabi-poetry is characterized by its simple sincerity and its fervent devotion to Kṛṣṇa.[1]

[1] For a history of the growth of Kabi-poetry in Bengal and a chronological list of the Kabiwālās, with some of the extant specimens of their productions, see S. K. De, *Bengali Literature in the Nineteenth Century*, pp. 38 ff. and pp. 302–86; and D. C. Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature*, pp. 696–706.

Pāṁchāli—It was a form of doggerel poetry, recited or sung. It was mostly religious in theme. Its origin cannot be definitely traced. Paṁchāl, or old Kanouj has been frequently suggested as being its birthplace. There were various kinds of Paṁchāli, such as Śaṇir-Pāṁchāli, Manasār-Pāṁchali, mostly written in praise of the gods and goddesses of popular Hindu mythology. Pāṁchālis were usually performed before somewhat informal assemblies. Dāśarathī Rāy (1804–57) is the most celebrated Pāṁchāli writer. He modified the earlier form by introducing many new features and made it popular in Bengal. The surviving specimens belong mostly to the period between 1800 and 1830. A description of a typical Pāṁchāli performance appears in Manomohan Basu's "Gītābalī" (pp. 161–3).[1]

Kathakatā—Kathakatās are passages, taken from the popular folk-tales, Bhāgavata and epics and narrated by professional "Kathaks" (story-tellers). The effect of the narration is heightened by songs, interspersed here and there. The aim is to impart religious instruction and to arouse devotional sentiments. The passages are usually in a highly ornate and Sanskritized Bengali and are quite poetic in character.[2] The "Kathaks" unlike the Kabiwālās were generally scholars and were moreover accomplished singers. The Vaiṣṇava "Gosvāmīs" (priests) have up to the present day an absolute monopoly of this profession. Rāmdhaṇ Śiromaṇi and Kṣetramohan Chūṛāmaṇi were among the greatest "Kathaks" known in Bengal.

Ṭappā—Is a name given to a specific mode or style of music. It is a light kind of music, mostly suited to love-songs. It was imitated from Hindusthānī music. It consists of a set of melodious variations of a single theme, usually of a very trifling and erotic nature. Unlike Kabi and Pāṁchāli, it was primarily a *baiṭhakī* song (parlour music), fashionable with the upper classes. Rām Nidhi Gupta (1738–1825), better known

[1] For a biographical account of Dāśarathī Rāy and a list of his works, see D. C. Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature*, pp. 743–51. For other details, see S. K. De, *Bengali Literature in the Nineteenth Century*, pp. 437–41.

[2] For specimens, see D. C. Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature*, p. 686.

as Nidhu Bābu, is the earliest known of Ṭappā writers. He was a contemporary of poets Rām Prasād and Bhārat Chandra and some of the earlier Kabiwālās. He had a contempt for all devotional songs and the current schools of popular poetry. The freedom and wantonness in which Ṭappā grew up, introduced a lot of sentimental rubbish and sensuality into Bengali literature.[1]

Kīrtan—Is perhaps the most popular of the old musical entertainments surviving to the present day. It is believed to have flourished before the Vaiṣṇava revival, but it was the Vaiṣṇavas who made it popular in Bengal and gave it its present form. There are generally four main varieties of Kīrtan, named after the places where they originated. Of the famous older "Kīrtanīyās," the name of Śibu of Kuṣṭhiā is most widely known. A Kīrtan usually consists in the singing of "padas" (verses) taken from the works of the Vaiṣṇava Padakartās (verse-makers), accompanied by suitable instrumental music.[2]

Hāp-ākhṛāi—Is a hybrid species of entertainment, formed by a combination of Kabi and a musical performance of the Tappā class. It was first introduced into Bengal by Mohan Chāṁd Basu of Bāghbazar, Calcutta.[3]

The miscellaneous rural poetry [4] of a lyrical and devotional character, written either to be sung or acted with appropriate music, is so diversified that it does not admit of satisfactory selection and treatment. Much of this literature is, however, ephemeral, limited as it was by the circumstances in which it developed. Most of the specimens survived and still survive in the mouths of the village people, and are hardly accessible in print. As a matter of fact, the whole of Bengali literature from the earliest to the modern times shows a remarkable preponderance of lyrics and musical poems. This has often been ascribed to the natural predilection of Bengalis for the

[1] For a biography of Nidhu Bābu, see Iśvar Chandra Gupta's "Saṁbād Prabhākar," *Śrāban*, 1261 B.S. (A.D. 1854–5). For a list of his works see D. C. Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature*, pp. 743–58.

[2] For a list of the celebrated Kīrtan singers, see D. C. Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature*, pp. 583–4.

[3] An account of Hāp-Ākhrāi appears in Iśvar Chandra Gupta's "Saṁbād Prabhākar," *Agrahāyaṇ*, 1261 B.S. (A.D. 1854–5).

[4] Accounts of rural poets and their songs have appeared from time to time in contemporary journals. Rabīndra Nāth Tagore has written a critical appreciation of the rural Bengali literature in his *Grāmya Sāhitya*.

emotional and æsthetic in art and literature. Many modern Bengali critics quite frankly extol the emotional aspect of the Yātrā. They are mostly of opinion that if a Yātrā can only rouse proper emotions by means of music alone, it has completely fulfilled its function. For instance, Dr. Dīneś Chandra Sen observes: "The Yātrās, without any regular stage, without scenery, without the artistic display of costumes, could arouse emotions which now-a-days we scarcely experience while witnessing semi-European performances given on the stages of the Calcutta theatres."[1] Mr. Hārāṇ Chandra Rakṣit, another well-known Bengali critic, in his contempt for the modern Bengali theatre, considerably over-estimates the importance of the musical element in the Yātrā.[2] The fact is that the preponderance of songs in the Yātrās is largely due to Vaiṣṇava influence. As Mr. E. J. Thompson pertinently remarks: "The Vaiṣṇava tradition continues the strongest to this day. Just as the softer beauty of Kālidāsa's poetry has touched the Bengali imagination far more than the sterner grace of the epics, so the cult of Kṛṣṇa has made that of Rama sink very much into the background. The race (Bengali) is emotional beyond any other in India, and Vaiṣṇava revivalists have again and again set flowing a wave of excitement which has covered the province."[3] The Vaiṣṇava Yātrāwālās, thus strongly inspired by the hyper-æstheticism of their cult, attempted to reform the Yātrā by excluding its cruder and more vulgar elements and by introducing a large number of devotional songs and love-lyrics, so much so that in course of time the Kṛṣṇa-Yātrā ceased to be a play in the strict sense of the term, and became a musical performance, consisting almost entirely of songs. The dialogue which had begun to emerge out of the mere improvization of the earlier Yātrās was thus deprived of every opportunity of development. The Kṛṣṇa-Yātrāwālās found that their audiences cared more for emotional ecstasies than for well-constructed plot, dialogue or dramatic action. The plot or the dialogue was considered

[1] *History of Bengali Language and Literature*, chap. vi, p. 730.
[2] *Victoria-Yuger Bāṅglā Sāhitya* (The Bengali Literature in the Victorian Era), pp. 270–2.
[3] *Rabīndra Nāth Tagore*: *His Life and Work*, p. 1.

necessary only so far as it communicated the story, and every opportunity was taken to excite appropriate emotions in the audience. Consequently, action occupied an altogether subordinate place in the performance. The main emphasis was on the music. A certain amount of dialogue or recitative was, of course, indispensable, but the words, whether spoken or sung, were marked by the same exuberance of emotion which characterized the music itself.

The comic relief of a Yātrā performance is usually supplied by a number of farcical episodes, almost invariably introduced at regular intervals. They are generally taken from scenes of low life and low manners. They belong to a much plainer and more ordinary sphere of social life than the kings and heroes of the play. The most common and hackneyed among these farcical interludes are those that take place between a sweeper and his wife, or between the king's steward and his sweetheart, or between the court-jester and the dancing girls. These are called in popular language "Saṅ."[1] In course of time, the "Saṅs" degenerated in tone and became intolerably obscene and scurrilous. Dr. Niśi Kānta Chaṭṭopādhyāy points out "that the witticisms indulged in are hardly of a very superior kind, the jests and mimics hardly very diverting or decent . . . Nevertheless they do seem to divert the audience for whom they are meant; at any rate, they afford a kind of relief against the oppressive heat of the midday when this comic pause usually takes place."[2] Professor Sylvain Lévi also observes: "La plupart des Yātrās n'ont pas survécu aux solennités qui les ont fait naître; improvisées pour divertir la multitude des fidèles, elles se servaient de la langue populaire, et ne visaient point aux mérites littéraires qui paraissaient leur être interdits en principe. Elles ne cherchaient à plaire que pour des farces

[1] For further details about "Saṅ," see "Jyotirindra Nāther Jīban-Smṛti" or the "Life and Reminiscences of Jyotirindra Nāth" (*Bhāratī Magazine*, Baiśakh Number, 1321 B.S. or A.D. 1914–15). Also see *Saṅkalpa*, 1st year, No. 1, pp. 39–40.

[2] "The comic pauses of the Yātrās," according to Dr. Chaṭṭopādhyāy, "bear the nearest analogy to the Interludes of the Elizabethan period (Scherr, *Litteraturgeschichte*, vol. iii, p. 21) or to the "Entremesses" of the Spanish stage (Ibid, vol. ii, p. 392), of which Cervantes is well-known to have composed so many and, beyond all doubt, so well." (*The Yātrās or The Popular Dramas of Bengal*, p. 9.)

grossières et des obscénités." [1] It is only natural that the grotesque obscenity and vulgarity with which the Yātrās generally abound, should have met with condemnation from the advanced sections of the modern Bengali community. This very largely explains why with the rise of the new Bengali drama in the nineteenth century,[2] the Yātrā has gradually fallen into popular disfavour. In their fruitless attempts to cater for modern tastes, some Yātrā producers are actually imitating the methods of the theatre of to-day and naturally these plays have lost much of their original simplicity and naïve charm.

There is also present in many Yātrās—especially in those which deal with Paurāṇic or legendary themes—an element which, in the absence of a better word, we may call the Destiny-element. It suggests the " deus ex machina " of the ancient Greek theatre, but it never actually takes the Greek form of a regular structural machine to enable the supernatural agencies to appear and disappear as they like. But the idea of a supernatural being who comes down to set right situations which cannot be adjusted without his interference, is exactly similar. The gods and goddesses of the Bengali Yātrā walk and move upon the stage like mortals and appear only a little differently dressed from the ordinary personages of the play. In many Yātrās the appearance of at least one of the Hindu Trimūrti, Brahmā, Viṣṇu or Śiva seems to be a matter of absolute necessity to bring the play to a successful conclusion. As a matter of fact, some of the Yātrās are so badly constructed that supernatural intervention becomes inevitable for the *dénoûement*. No wonder that Aristotle [3] should condemn the use of the " deus ex machina " on the ground that the conclusion should always be the natural result of the events which precede. The Yātrā writers never seem to make any serious attempt at constructing a consistent dramatic plot. They will invent nothing beyond what is provided for them in the original legends of old mythology. Professor Lévi remarks : " Les naïfs spectateurs des Yâtrâs, ne goûtaient pas les innovations ; ils ne se fatiguaient pas

[1] *Le Théâtre Indien*, p. 395.
[2] See Chaps. VIII and IX, pp. 37–48.
[3] See *Poetics*, Chap. xv.

d'entendre éternellement les mêmes histoires, de revoir les mêmes personnages. La nouveauté les déroutait ; ils aimaient à retrouver comme d'anciens amis les types familiers." [1]

The monotony of theme, the preponderance of music over action, and the scurrility and obscenity of the comic interludes are among the serious drawbacks which prevented the development of the Yātrā into a truly national Bengali drama. It is true, nevertheless, that the Yātrā possessed the inherent possibilities of a really good actable play. But the conditions were not favourable for such a development. With the flood of new ideas that came to Bengal in the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Yātrā, like many other time-honoured institutions, was replaced by something more modern. A new spirit, a new order of things came into being. The country was passing through an experience which can only be described as an intellectual re-birth, resulting in a literary revolution. In the circumstances, nothing could have really revived the older forms of dramatic representation and restored them to their former glory and popularity. The impression of Western literature and drama was for a time almost overwhelming and the genius of the Bengali race was naturally incited to attempt new inventions and new experiments. So the Yātrā was left behind. Perhaps for many years more it will yet remain true to its traditions and never completely disappear from Bengal.

[1] *Le Théâtre Indien*, p. 395.

CHAPTER VI

The Bengali Drama in Nepāl

An interesting discovery was made some years ago in Nepāl of certain Bengali plays written in the early eighteenth century.[1] These plays are quite outside the main development of the drama in Bengal, but they are worthy of notice as indicating the influence of Bengali drama outside of Bengal itself. The titles of the plays are *Vidyā-Bilāp* (The Lamentation of Vidyā) by Kāśīnāth, *Mahābhārata* by Kṛṣṇa Deb, *Rāma-Charitra* (The Life of Rāma) by Gaṇeś and *Mādhavānal-Kāmakandalā* by Dhaṇapati. They are all written in the Nebārī script but the language is Bengali. The first three are in the same handwriting, but the last is written by a different hand. They have been printed directly from the manuscripts without modification. Twenty-two pages of *Vidyā-Bilāp*, eighty of *Mahābhārata*, forty-two of *Rāma-Charitra* and the nineteenth page of *Mādhavānal-Kāmakandalā* are missing. There is no doubt that these works were written by Bengalis, although the language is mixed here and there with Hindī and Maithilī, and the meaning of some of the Bengali words is uncertain. It is quite probable that the authors, having lived in Nepāl for a long time, had to a certain extent lost the purity of their mother tongue. But, for the most part, the language reminds one of the eighteenth century Bengali—the style of Bhārat Chandra and Rām Prasād and of that of Banamālī Dās and other Vaiṣṇava writers. *Rām-Charitra* is written in a comparatively modern style. Other languages besides Bengali have also been used occasionally in the plays. In one play a Muhammadan character speaks in Urdu and a Mārwāṛī speaks the language of Mārwāṛ in another.

The plays were evidently written during the reign of a Nebār king Bhūpatīndra of Bhāṭgāon and his son Raṇajit Malla. Most

[1] See *Nepāle Bāṅglā Nāṭak* (The Bengali Drama in Nepāl), published by Mr. Nanī Gopāl Bandyopādhyāy, Calcutta, 1916–17, "Baṅgīya Sāhitya Pariṣat Mandir" (The Academy of Bengali Literature).

of the songs are either addressed or dedicated to one of the two kings. The Gurkhas conquered Nepāl from Raṇajit Malla in 1768. Bhūpatīndra and his son Raṇajit reigned for about sixty-eight years and during their reign, arts and literature flourished in Nepāl. They were both great patrons of learning and invited scholars from different lands to their court. The most influential among the royal protégés were the Bengali Brāhmaṇs. The Bengali Brāhmaṇs were also the royal preceptors for many generations at the courts of the Malla kings of Bhāṭgāon, Kāṭāmundu and Lalitapattan. They were rich and owned large property received by royal grant. Before the Gurkhas came and deprived the Bengali Brāhmaṇs of their privileges, some of the latter used to go to Bengal to marry Brāhmaṇ girls, whom they took back with them to Nepāl. The Gurkhās brought their own priests with them, the Brāhmaṇs of Kurmānchal or Kumāyun. So the Bengali Brāhmaṇs lost all influence after the Gurkha conquest of Nepāl.

These four plays found in Nepāl cannot be passed over as mere curiosities of literature. They throw a very interesting sidelight on the development of Bengali literature and drama. Two hundred years ago, or perhaps even more, Bengali learning and religion penetrated mountains which stretch for two thousand miles from the eastern end of Assam as far as Bokhārā and spread their influence in Nepāl. So very little is known about the extension of Bengali culture outside of Bengal itself that this little discovery cannot be too highly valued. None of these plays, however, can be regarded as "drama" in the strict sense of the term, though they are all written in dramatic form. The model which they imitate is, of course, the old Sanskrit drama, and the stories are taken from the epics and folk-lore of Bengal. The words, written all in verse, are meant to be recited and songs interspersed, to be sung at given intervals. We do not know if these plays were ever acted. Perhaps they were, because stage-directions are inserted at various points. Instructions are also given as to the mode or style in which a particular song ought to be sung. The form in which these plays are moulded roughly resembles that in which Bhārat Chandra wrote his *Chaṇḍī-*

Nāṭak. It is quite evident that the writers were learned Paṇḍits, fully versed in the rules of the Sanskrit drama. Their work is only important as showing the natural interest of the Bengali mind in dramatic representation. It is tempting to speculate as to the probable influence that such plays might have exerted, if they had been composed in Bengal instead of Nepāl, and as to whether they are one of the broken links in the development of the drama in India, a total recovery of which would enable one to trace completely its historical evolution.

CHAPTER VII

The Antiquity of the Theatre in India

Nowhere in the ancient history of India do we find any specific references to dramatic performances upon a regular stage. The theorists of Sanskrit drama and rhetoricians do not mention the existence of theatres in ancient India for the production of plays. The only record left to us is Bharat's memorable work on Sanskrit dramaturgy called the *Bhāratīya Nāṭyaśāstra*, which discusses the technical details of stage-building and deals with the architectural methods and designs for the auditorium. This natually leads one to suppose that there must have existed in ancient India theatres for which Bharat made his suggestions. But, unfortunately, we are not as yet in possession of any conclusive historical facts to corroborate such a supposition and to tell us where such theatres first existed or how their performances were conducted. A new light has, however, been thrown on the subject by Dr. Bloch's recent discovery of the remains of an ancient cave which is believed to have been used for the purposes of dramatic representation.[1] This discovery was made in 1903 at Rāmgarh Hill in the area of Lakṣmaṇpur on the estate of Sirgujā, about a hundred miles from Kharsiā on the Bengal Nagpur Railway line. Dr. Bloch says "that the plan of the small amphitheatre in front of the cave with its hemispherical rows of rock-cut seats rising in terraces above each other and with the pathways between them arranged somewhat like concentric circles and radiants, bears a somewhat similar resemblance to the plan of a Greek theatre cannot, I think, be overlooked. And it will likewise be admitted that the shape of a Greek theatre in an Indian building that served similar purposes has a strong bearing upon the question of the Greek influence on the Indian drama." [2]

[1] See *The Archæological Survey of India Report* (1903–4), pp. 123 ff. For illustrations of the caves, see Plates Nos. xliii, (*a*), (*b*), (*c*), p. 124.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 127.

Dr. Bloch concludes by saying that the cave "evidently was not the abode of pious ascetics void of all worldly achievements, but . . . it was a place where poetry was recited, love songs were sung and theatrical performances acted. In short, we may look upon it as an Indian theatre of the third century B.C."[1] Dr. Bloch quotes the view of Professor Lüders that caves in ancient India were not exclusively the abode of ascetics and *sādhus*, but were also the resort of dancing girls and their lovers.[2] Professor Lüders, in support of his own view again, quotes a number of passages from Kālidāsa, and the most ingenious of all his suggestions is the interpretation of the word "leṇaśobhikā" (which occurs in one of the Mathurā inscriptions) as meaning "a cave-actress." Further, as regards the Greek influence on stage-building and stage-architecture in ancient India, Dr. Bloch does not think it "in the least improbable that, if Indians became acquainted with Greek theatres, the suitability of the arrangement of these must have led them to adopt similar structures for their own places of amusement. The Greek influence often stretches very far in India and in time, I believe, we shall be able to trace it much farther than we think at present".[3] Dr. Bloch also mentions in this connection the well-known statue of Apollo carved upon one of the pillars at Buddha Gayā, and another similar figure discovered inside the Ānanda cave. There is perhaps little doubt as regards Greek influence on the architecture of ancient India, but it is still very difficult to judge (unless some more historical facts of an authentic nature are available) to what extent this one single discovery of an amphitheatre in a cave at Rāmgarh Hill could solve the much-discussed question of the Greek influence on the Indian drama.[4] But, in any case, we know that

[1] *The Archæological Survey of India Report*, pp. 126–7.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 127, and *The Journal of the German Oriental Society*, vol. lviii, p. 867.

[3] *Ibid.*, p. 128.

[4] For fuller details, see Sylvain Lévi: *Le Théâtre Indien*, chapter entitled "L'Influence Grecque," pp. 343–66; A. B. Keith: *The Sanskrit Drama*, pp. 57–68; G. N. Banerjee: *Hellenism in Ancient India*, pp. 240–65; E. Windisch: *Der Grieschische Einfluss im Indischen Drama*, II, ii, 3; Weber: *Indische Studien*, vol. xviii, p. 492, and vol. xiii, p. 354 ff.; Winternitz: *Vienna Oriental Journal*, xxiii, 103 ff.; also Klein: *Geschichte der Drama*, vol. iii; F. Kielhorn: "Sanskrit Plays as Preserved in Inscriptions" (*Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1891).

the first theatres in Bengal were not established in the line or tradition of the stage-architecture or architectonics of ancient India.[1] They were an entirely new institution, produced by influences entirely alien to the Hindu race, and yet quite suited to the genius of a people responsive to new influences, no matter from what country they may come.

We have already pointed out that at the present stage of historical science in India, no such thing as "continuity" can be discovered in her literary history. But to regard Hindu civilization as being totally non-secular and ultra-spiritual is only to take a very superficial and prejudiced view of Hindu history and culture. Sufficient information is not certainly available to enable one to give a well-connected historical account of the secular achievements of Hindu civilization, but there is no doubt that pessimism or other-worldliness was not the only stuff out of which Indian social or cultural life was made. The spiritual attainments of the Hindu race could never have been of such high order, if the collective and communal life of its social organizations had not been favourable. Indian history has its sociological backgrounds and there was never perhaps a greater need than at the present time to study the Indian as a social being and as the product of sociological forces and environments both in the past and in the present.

[1] See Chaps. IX–XI, pp. 40–55.

THE BEGINNINGS OF THE MODERN BENGALI DRAMA

CHAPTER VIII

The New Era

The year 1757 is a turning-point in the political and literary history of Bengal. It was the year of the Battle of Plassey, which may be regarded as the beginning of the British rule. From this point onwards Bengal has been passing through a series of changes, both political and social, as remarkable as any to be found in the history of any other nation within a similar period. Dr. S. K. De [1] gives a very illuminating account of the rise and growth of British power in Bengal and analyses the actual causes and circumstances of the revolution in social and political ideas which has resulted from it. The noted Bengali historian Rameś Chandra Datta remarked that "the conquest of Bengal by the English was not only a political revolution but involved a greater revolution in thoughts and ideas, in religion and society. We cannot describe the great change better than by stating that English conquest and English education may be supposed to have removed Bengal from the moral atmosphere of Asia to that of Europe. All the great events which have influenced European thought within the last hundred years have also told, however feeble the effect may be, on the formation of the intellect of modern Bengal." [2] The first effect of this impact of a new and alien civilization was almost paralysing. Upon this there followed a tendency to blind imitation of Western models. This, however, was a phase which could not last indefinitely. Bengalis began to reconsider their own national heritage in the light of their

[1] See *The History of Bengali Literature in the Nineteenth Century*, chap. xi, pp. 7–64.

[2] *The Literature of Bengal*, 1877 ed., chap. xv, p. 169.

new experiences and gradually arrived at a new appreciation of the achievements of the past and also a new realization of the possibilities of the future. They learnt to face the fresh facts by which they were confronted and fit them into a consistent scheme of thought. This new mental outlook naturally expressed itself in new forms of creative art.

After the death of Bhārat Chandra in 1760, the Bengali literature began to decline and the process of decadence was almost complete by the time the British power in Bengal had been fully consolidated. Fortunately, however, the British conquest of Bengal while hastening the disintegration of the older Bengali literature, at the same time helped to quicken Bengal to new forms of literary activity. This is not the place to discuss at length the complicated social and political history of the period or to point out in detail the far-reaching results of the gradual establishment of British power in Bengal. For our purpose it will be sufficient to remember that between the death of Bhārat Chandra in 1760, and the first appearance of Īśvar Chandra Gupta's journal *Saṁbād Prabhakār* in 1830, the new influences brought about by the growing contact of Bengali life and thought with Western civilization, had already begun to make themselves felt. By 1857 the new era had actually commenced in Bengal. Now, what were the predominant characteristics of this new era ? First, a revival of classical studies and a return to the older traditions, and second, a steady assimilation of European thoughts and ideas, both under the direct influence of English education. In 1800 the Fort William College was established, and William Carey's " Śrīrāmpur Mission " was formed ; in 1816 the Hindu College was founded in Calcutta ; and in 1825 the last volume of Carey's *Dictionary* was published. From an historical as well as a literary point of view the labours of the Christian Missionaries and English civilians for the spread of English education and the revival of the Bengali language and literature were inestimable. The literary renaissance in Bengal was, to a considerable extent, brought about by the revival of Sanskritic studies directly under the influence of Missionaries, Paṇḍits and Munshīs. A further contributory cause was the strong desire for self-expression in the vernacular,

naturally resulting from the circumstances of the time. In those days, the new rulers of Bengal did not try to sweep away the old literature and the old traditions completely, but they helped them to be born anew with a new life and a new promise of the future. It does not, therefore, surprise us in the least to know that some of the earliest precursors of the theatre in Bengal were a handful of Europeans who had introduced at the commencement of British rule several play-houses and concert-halls primarily for their own enjoyment and recreation. We will have to find out now the actual conditions under which Bengal established a new theatre and a new drama of her own and how she developed them on modern and yet independent lines.

CHAPTER IX

The European Theatres and their Early Imitators

When European theatres first appeared in Bengal, they immediately captured the people's imagination and appealed to their mind as a very interesting and suitable instrument of both pleasure and education. They had, of course, their Yātrās and performances of similar nature, but with the coming of new ideas they were beginning to be dissatisfied with them. In the English play-houses they discovered for the first time an entirely novel and, indeed, more profitable source of entertainment and conceived a desire to make full use of it and to adapt it, as we shall presently see, to their own models and standards. The growth of Calcutta as a metropolis and its development as the centre of the intellectual life and activity of Bengal must be considered as an event of first rate importance in the history of the Bengali Theatre.[1] The first English theatre to be established in Calcutta was at Lāl Bazar in 1756, the year before the battle of Plassey. It was probably situated somewhere on the eastern side of the junction of the present Lāl Bazar Street and Mission Row, opposite to the site where the old Court House originally stood. Among the English theatres established after 1756, the "Calcutta Theatre" and the "Chowringhee Theatre" were the two most popular and best known. The "Calcutta Theatre" established about 1775 was somewhere near the northern section of Clive Street to the north of Writers Buildings. It is difficult to ascertain accurately

[1] For detailed information, see Harisādhan Mukherji: *Kalikātā Se Kāler O E Kāler* (Calcutta, Ancient and Modern), 1915; Biṇay Kṛṣṇa Deb: *The Early History and Growth of Calcutta*, 1905; H. E. Busteed: *Echoes from Old Calcutta*, eds. 1888 and 1908; Sir H. E. A. Cotton: *Calcutta Old and New*, 1907; Rainey: *Historical and Topographical Sketch of Calcutta*, 1876; H. Verelst: *View of the Rise, Progress, and Present State of the English Government in Bengal*, 1772; Rev. J. A. Long: *Selections from the Unpublished Records of Government from* 1648–1767 *relating to Social Conditions of Bengal*, 1867; and "Calcutta in Olden Time" (*The Calcutta Review* of 1850 and 1860).

the exact location of the "Calcutta Theatre," because the accounts in the various old records are rather conflicting.[1] The theatre was built at a cost of about a lac of rupees, raised by subscription shares of one hundred rupees each. Warren Hastings, Chief Justice Sir E. Impey and General Monson were among the subscribers. In 1780 and the following years, many English plays were performed at this theatre, from which may be mentioned *The Comedy of Beaux Stratagem*, *The Comedy of Foundling*, *The School for Scandal*, *Mahomet*, *Citizen*, *Like Master Like Man*, *She would and Would Not*, *High Life Below Stairs*, *Hamlet*, and *Richard III*. It is reported that David Garrick sent out one Mr. Massinck or Massing to take charge of the "Calcutta Theatre." At first the female rôles were taken by men, but later, following the example of the "Chowringhee Theatre" women were introduced. Lord Cornwallis was a supporter of this theatre, although, at the same time, he strongly disapproved of Government Officers taking part in the performances. In 1908, the building and its adjoining site were bought by Gopi Mohan Tagore and made into what is known to-day as the "New China Bazar." The "Chowringhee Theatre" known in those days as "Mrs. Bistow's Theatre" was started in 1787 by Mrs. Bistow, wife of an English merchant, at her own residence, situated at the junction of Chowringhee and Theatre Road. Mrs. Bistow was an excellent manageress and a very good actress herself. From an account of her in Dr. Busteed's *Echoes from Old Calcutta*, we learn that "her strong points were in comedy and humorous singing."[2] The "Chowringhee Theatre" was for a long time a rival of the "Calcutta Theatre" and scored a point over the latter by first introducing actresses.

Following the successful enterprises of the "Calcutta Theatre" and the "Chowringhee Theatre," several English theatres of a rather ephemeral nature sprang up in and outside Calcutta—one at Chandernagore in 1808, one at Kidderpore in 1815, one called "The Athenæum" in 1812, at 18 Lower Circular Road, where two English plays *The Earl of Essex* and *Raising the Wind* were successfully staged, and

[1] See *The Calcutta Gazette*, 16th November, 1786.
[2] See p. 138.

one at Dum Dum in 1817, started by an Artillery Officer named Charles Franckling, and after his death in 1822, managed under improved conditions by a young actress, Mrs. Esther Leach. But the theatre which attracted the greatest notice of the Bengalis was "The Private Subscription Theatre," built on Chowringhee Road in 1813 and opened on the 25th November of the same year. The theatre owed its name to the fact that it was built by means of private donations and money raised by offering shares of Rs. 100 each. In those days it was the most spacious theatre in Calcutta and could accommodate nearly three hundred people.[1] The Governor-General Lord Moyra was a patron of the theatre and was present with his wife on the opening night. Amongst other performances at which Their Excellencies were present may be mentioned *Henry IV* on the 23rd January, 1814; *She Stoops to Conquer* on the 13th May, 1814; *The Merry Wives of Windsor* on the 25th September, 1818; *The Sleeping Draught* on the 24th June, 1819; and *West India* on July 29th, 1819. At several performances during years 1824–8 Lord and Lady Amherst were present. In 1830 the theatre reached its height of popularity. It had had a most successful career of over twenty-six years, continuing till the 31st May, 1839 when it was destroyed by fire.[2] It had attracted the support of such distinguished Englishmen as Professor H. H. Wilson of the Sanskrit College, Captain Richardson of the Hindu College and Mr. J. H. Stocqueler, the editor of the *Englishman*, who from time to time also used to appear as amateur actors. It was assisted throughout by talented artistes of both sexes.[3] Mrs. Leach was connected with this theatre as its leading actress from 1825 to 1838, after which she went to England. The *Calcutta Gazette*, the *Bengal Hurkara*, the *Bengal Courier* and the *Asiatic Journal* published regularly notices and reviews of performances at this theatre. Commenting on the rather late

[1] See *The Calcutta Gazette*, 28th January, 1814; 17th May, 1814; and 25th August, 1815.

[2] For a much fuller account of the theatre, see *Asiatic Journal*, August, 1828, and January, 1835, and for an account of the fire see *The Bengal Hurkara*, 1st and 12th June, 1839 and *The Englishman*, 4th June, 1839.

[3] See *Asiatic Journal*, May, 1838.

hours of some of its productions, the *Asiatic Journal* of the 30th February, 1830 wrote: "As the budget was long and continued up to 12 o'clock, a large number of the audience had left before the curtain fell, out of tedium." The *Calcutta Gazette* of the 31st August, 1815 had this remark on the performance of *Richard III* on the 25th August, 1815: "We have not known there of any representation for some time past with more success." The theatre, besides being popular for its Shakespearean plays, was noted also for musical comedies and farces.

After the destruction of the "Private Subscription Theatre" a new English play-house called the "Sans Souci" was started in Calcutta in 1841 mainly by the combined enterprise of Mr. Stocqueler and Mrs. Leach. It occupied a building in Park Street, which is now included in the St. Xavier's College. Lord Auckland, the then Governor-General made a donation of one thousand rupees towards its construction, and about six thousand rupees were raised by private subscriptions. The theatre opened on the 8th March, 1841 with a Sheridan Knowles' play *The Wife*. Professor Wilson, Capt. Richardson, Mr. H. A. Torrens, a Bengal civilian and his son-in-law Mr. James Hume, a barrister who later rose to be the chief Presidency Magistrate, used to appear as amateurs at this theatre. Mr. Stocqueler brought also several actors and actresses from England. At the performance of a comedy entitled *The Handsome Husband* on the 2nd November, 1843 Mrs. Leach's costume caught fire and she died of her injuries on the 18th November. After her tragic death the theatre was leased by the proprietress, Mrs. Baxter to a French company which continued till the 24th April, 1844.

At first the European theatres were patronized among the Bengalis only by a few rich and influential men, the most noteworthy being the members of the Tagore family. The earliest known attempt to start a truly Bengali theatre for the production of plays in the vernacular was made in the year 1795 by a Russian adventurer named Herasim Lebedoff. Lebedoff first came to Madras as a bandmaster in 1785 and arrived in Calcutta two years later. He began to take an interest in the Indian vernaculars and learned Hindusthāni from a Bengali scholar named Golak Nāth Dās. He is said to have been for a time in

the service of the Moguls. Lebedoff came to England in 1801 and wrote a Hindusthani grammar which has been published by Sir George Grierson. Lebedoff built his theatre at 25 Domtallah Lane with the permission of the then Governor-General, Sir John Shore, afterwards Lord Teignmouth. Two English plays, namely *The Disguise* and *Love is the Best Doctor* were translated into Bengali and Bengali actors of both sexes were employed for the performances.[1] The performance of the first play, the title of which was translated in Bengali as *Chhadmabeś*, took place on the 27th November, 1795. The play was announced in the 5th November and 26th November issues of the *Calcutta Gazette*, 1795. A synopsis of the play was distributed to the audience. English and Indian instruments were used for the musical accompaniment and some Hindusthāni music was played. There were also some recitals at intervals of Bhārat Chandra's poetry. The performance of the second play took place on the 21st March, 1796.[2] Both the performances

[1] References to Lebedoff are to be found in two magazine articles, the first appearing in a Bengali theatrical monthly called *Rup O Raṅga* (first number, 1924–5, pp. 15–18) by Mr. Hemendra Nāth Dās Gupta, and the second by Mr. Śyāmā Prasād Mukherji in the Calcutta University journal *The Calcutta Review* (January, 1924, pp. 108–10). But there are a number of discrepancies between the two versions of the story. Mr. Mukherji, for instance, writes "Lebedeff," whereas Mr. Dās Gupta writes "Lebedoff." Mr. Mukherji says that the theatre was situated in "Dom Tollah" (probably the present Dharamtallah), whereas Mr. Dās Gupta writes that Lebedoff built the theatre at No. 25 Dom Tollah Lane, which is now called Ezra Street. Mr. Dās Gupta further mentions that the old site of Lebedoff's theatre is probably the present No. 21 Ezra Street, either near the Armenian Church or a little to the east of it, quite close to the present "Central Theatre." Lastly, Mr. Mukherji refers to the English plays as having been translated by Lebedoff into Bengali. Mr. Dās Gupta, on the contrary, states that Golak Nāth Dās did the translation. Neither of these writers gives any real clue to the sources of his information, so it is not possible to decide which of the two versions is the more accurate.

Mr. Dās Gupta also reports that it was Golak Dās again who secured the services of the women for the performances and that this was the first instance of the appearance of Bengali women in Bengali theatres. Apart from this alleged instance, about which we cannot help feeling some doubts, it was not until thirty-eight years later in the *Vidya-Sundar* performance in 1833 (see p. 46 of this chapter) do we find any reference to Bengali women taking part in public performances. In the year 1873 the fashion had started. "The Oriental Theatre" on the 15th February, "The National Lyceum" on the 17th June, and, most notably, "The Bengal Theatre" on the 16th August of that year began to employ actresses regularly. (See Chap. XXI, p. 116.)

[2] See *The Calcutta Gazette*, 17th March, 1796.

attracted a large audience, and in a letter published in the *Calcutta Gazette* of the 24th March, 1796 Lebedoff " respectfully acknowledged the very distinguished patronage " of his audience and assured them of " his most grateful sense " of the " very liberal support " given to his venture. It is rather strange that Lebedoff did not continue the experiment.

The reason why the Russian used English plays translated into Bengali for his performances instead of original plays in the vernacular, was probably that there were no good Bengali dramas to be found as early as 1795, in fact, none worthy of the name. In a critical review of a Bengali translation of Kālidāsa's *Abhijñan Śakuntal*, Rājendra Lāl Mitra wrote in his journal *Bibidhārtha Saṁgraha* of 1860 that he had read as many as thirty-four older Bengali plays, but he did not mention the titles of any of them.[1] We have not been able to discover any of these plays alluded to by Rājendra Lāl, and so we are not in a position to estimate their worth. It is said that the poet Īśvar Chandra Gupta had a profound contempt for all the dramas of his own day and used to remark with a characteristic pun on the word " nāṭak " (which means " drama " in Bengali) : " Nā ṭak, nā miṣṭi (neither sour nor sweet)." Occasional references to Bengali works in more or less dramatic form are to be found in some of the early journals and periodicals. For instance, the eighth issue of Rājā Rām Mohan Rāy's newspaper *Saṁbād Kaumudī* of 1821 contains a criticism of an old Bengali drama called *Kalirājār Yātrā*.[2] From a descriptive account of the play which appeared a year later in the *Asiatic Journal*,[3] it appears that the play was a farce, but the word *yātrā* in the title of the play still leaves us in doubt whether it could be accepted seriously as a genuine dramatic work. Works of this nature are not very uncommon in old Bengali literature. They are written in the form of a narrative with the aid of a conventional dialogue, and are usually only treatises in verse.

[1] See Mr. A. N. Rāy's article entitled " Nāṭuke Rām Nārāyaṇ " in *Nārāyaṇ*, a Bengali literary monthly edited by the late Mr. C. R. Dāś, Phālgun Number 1322 B.S., i.e. A.D. 1916, p. 356.

[2] Reference is also made to this play in *The Calcutta Review*, vol. xiii, 1850, see p. 160.

[3] September Number, 1822.

They do not possess any of those essential qualities which go to make a drama. As a matter of fact, the modern Bengali drama was the direct outcome of the new Bengali theatre which did not actually come into being until half a century after the Bengali productions of Lebedoff.

The first genuine Bengali theatre to be established in Calcutta was the "Hindu Theatre" in 1832 under the patronage of Prasanna Kumār Tagore. The *Asiatic Journal* of April, 1832 contained a note upon the proposed aims and the personnel of the committee appointed to organize this theatre. Some of the Anglo-Indian newspapers treated this Bengali enterprise with derision. But the theatre was built on the premises of Tagore's Beliāghāṭā garden residence and Bhavabhūti's *Uttar Rāma Charita*, translated from the original Sanskrit into English by Professor H. H. Wilson, was successfully staged in the early part of 1832. Professor Wilson coached the actors, and the play was produced entirely under his direction and supervision. The audience consisted of many well-known Bengalis and Europeans like Chief Justice Sir Edward Ryan and Rājā Rādhā Kānta Deb. Prasanna Kumār Tagore's theatre survived only for a year or so, perhaps because all the plays produced there were English and not Bengali. But the new enthusiasm of the Bengalis for theatrical entertainments awakened by the success of English plays and playhouses, could not entirely die. In 1833,[1] a performance of *Vidyā Sundar* was given at the Shambazar residence of Nabin Chandra Basu by an amateur company of both sexes. The play was a dramatized version

[1] The date of this performance has been disputed by some writers. Paṇḍit Mahendra Nāth Vidyānidhi in his *Sandarbha Saṁgraha* makes it 1831 and Mr. Śyāmā Prasād Mukherji in his article entitled "The Bengali Theatre" (see *The Calcutta Review*, January, 1924, pp. 110–11) agrees with the Paṇḍit. This naturally raises the question whether the performance of *Vidyā Sundar* preceded the founding of the "Hindu Theatre." But we have it on the authority of the *Hindu Pioneer* of October, 1835 that Nabīn Chandra Basu's theatre-company did not start until 1833, which clearly shows that the "Hindu Theatre" had ceased to exist when *Vidyā Sundar* was produced. Moreover, it does not seem likely that the *Hindu Pioneer* would mention this performance as late as 1835 if it had actually taken place in 1831. We have also a definite mention of the "Hindu Theatre" to have been established in 1832 in the April issue of the *Asiatic Journal* of 1832, already mentioned.

of an episode in Bhārat Chandra's *Annadā Maṅgal.* It was a story well-known to every Bengali and naturally the play aroused great interest. The organizers of this performance were a handful of well-to-do Bengali dilletantes in Calcutta who defrayed the entire cost of its production. Judged by modern standards, the performance cannot be said to have been remarkable. It was quite theatrical, but would hardly be called dramatic. To display properly certain scenic effects like thunder and lightning, Nabīn Basu imported stage-materials from England at a great cost. The play had to be staged at different parts of the building ; and with the change of scenes, the audience had to move on continuously from one place to another. For example, the scene in which Sundar, the hero of the play, is shown as sitting on the bank of a pond under a tree, was laid near the lake in Nabīn Basu's garden, the scene of the council-chamber was staged in the drawing-room of his house, and the thatched cottage in which the flower-girl Mālinī lived was shown in still another part of the building. This continuous change of scene resulted in a great deal of confusion and inconvenience and also in a certain lack of central interest both in the play and in its setting. An actor would appear before each of these inconveniently arranged changes of place and recite lines from the play to the audience so as to explain the events which would follow next. The recruitment of actresses from the low women of the city met with violent and hostile criticism from the Anglo-Indian Press. The play, however, continued to be performed for three successive years at regular intervals, and its success was phenomenal.[1] Nabī Bnasu was untiring in his enthusiasm and was so recklessly lavish and extravagant that he came almost to the verge of financial ruin. *Vidyā Sundar* may truly be regarded as the first Bengali performance produced on a Bengali stage and acted exclusively by Bengali men and women. But *Vidyā Sundar* was by no means an original play in the

[1] The *Asiatic Journal* of April, 1836 reproduces from the *Hindu Pioneer* of October, 1835 the latter's description of Nabīn Basu's theatre under the title "The Native Theatre." This description furnishes us with many details as regards these *Vidyā Sundar* performances.

vernacular. The story is taken from a poem which was never intended to be a drama. The greatest difficulty which confronted the Bengali stage at this period of its history was the total absence of good actable plays in the vernacular.

CHAPTER X

English Plays Produced by Bengalis

The popular enthusiasm for theatrical entertainments, thus further encouraged by the successful performances of *Vidyā Sundar*, continued unabated and in the absence of suitable plays in the vernacular, found for the time being an altogether different means of expression. The Hindu College and the Oriental Seminary were then the two prominent educational institutions in Calcutta. Captain D. L. Richardson of the Hindu College was a great theatre enthusiast and used to induce his students to go and see English plays at the European theatres in Calcutta and even distributed free tickets to them. Hermann Jaffroy, a retired French barrister and the then Principal of the Oriental Seminary, was another great lover of the theatre. He inspired his students with a love of the drama and helped them in every possible way to understand and appreciate the stage. Shortly after Nabīn Basu's theatre was closed, students of the Hindu College gave a successful performance of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* on the 30th March, 1837 at the Viceregal Lodge in the presence of Lord Auckland, and encouraged by this, they went on producing more English plays, namely *The King and the Miller*, *Topsy Tosspot*, *Lodgings for a Single Gent* and *The Dramatic Aspirant*. The students of the Oriental Seminary, stirred by the repeated successes of their rivals, made arrangements for a performance of *Julius Cæsar* in 1840, in honour of the prospective visit of Lord Auckland to their school, but afterwards had to abandon the project for lack of funds. Twelve years later in 1852 *Julius Cæsar* was, however, staged by the students of the Metropolitan Academy. It may be noted that Hermann Jaffroy was one of the principal organizers of this performance. In March, 1853 a number of senior students and ex-students of the Oriental Seminary, inspired to a large extent by a second successful performance

of *Julius Cæsar* in 1852 at Pyārī Mohan Basu's house, formed a regular theatre company of their own called " The Oriental Theatre." [1] They staged plays within their own school premises. They kept their venture going quite successfully for about two years, and a number of Shakespearean plays such as *Othello*, (22nd September, 1853), *The Merchant of Venice* (2nd March, 1854), *Henry IV*, Part I (15th February, 1855) were produced. " The Oriental Theatre " company used to invite some of the well-known English actors in Calcutta of the time, notably Mr. Clinger of the " Sans Souci " and Mr. Parker of the " Chowringhee Theatre," to assist them in getting up their plays and also to coach them for some of the difficult parts. They never produced any Bengali plays. Later a few well-to-do and influential Bengalis ventured to have performances of English plays in their own private houses. In 1852 Pyāri Mohan Basu, a nephew of Nabīn Chandra Basu, had Shakespeare's *Julius Cæsar* staged at his own house at Bārānsaī Ghos Street, and many well-known Bengalis of that time took part in this performance. Within a short time the enthusiasm for English plays and interest in Western methods of performance became a kind of obsession with the small educated Bengali community of Calcutta. English plays had, however, no interest for the large section of the Bengali public ignorant of the English language. Many of them came to these performances, sat patiently for a while, gazed wonderingly at costumes and scenery, understood not a syllable of what the players spoke, and afterwards went away bitterly disappointed.

[1] The word " theatre " has come to be used in Bengali often not to denote a play-house but a temporary stage or even a theatrical company which gives occasional performances.

CHAPTER XI

The First Bengali Play

The year 1857 was a landmark in the history of the Bengali drama. It saw the appearance and performance of an original play in the vernacular entitled *Kulīn-Kul-Sarbasva* (A. Kulīn's All in All) written by Paṇḍit Rām Nārāyaṇ Tarkaratna. A good deal of controversy has taken place as to whether *Kulīn-Kul-Sarbasva* is the first original play in the Bengali language. For a long time it was almost universally regarded as such, and it is only very recently that two or three older plays have been discovered and the claims of each of these to be regarded as the first genuine Bengali drama are being vigorously championed.[1]

Tārā Chāṁd Śikdār's *Bhadrārjun*, an original play in the vernacular, based on the story of Arjuna's elopement and subsequent marriage with Bhadrā, the sister of Śrī Kṛṣṇa, is by far the most discussed.[2] According to the date printed on its cover, it was apparently written in 1856, that is, at least one year before *Kulīn-Kul-Sarbasva* was published. Tārā Chāṁd attempted to frame his play on English models and to adopt all the orthodox English dramatic devices. In a short preface to the play the author explains and partly apologises for his departure from the established rules of the classical Hindu drama. He says, "I have followed a new plan in the composition of my play . . . the events of the play and the places of occurrence in the story have been denoted in the manner of the European drama but

[1] See Rāmgati Nyāyaratna's *Bāṅglā Bhāṣā O Bāṅglā Sāhitya Biṣayak Prastāb* (A Discourse on Bengali Language and Literature), pp. 293–4.

[2] See Dhanañjay Mukherji, *Baṅgīya Nāṭya Śālā* (The Bengali Theatre), pp. 2–3; Rāj Nārāyaṇ Basu, *Bāṅglā Bhāṣā O Sāhitya Biṣayak Baktṛtā* (A Lecture on Bengali Language and Literature), and *Nārāyaṇ*, Magh Number, 1321 B.S., i.e. A.D. 1915, pp. 283–91 and Chaitra Number of the same year, pp. 491–504.

I have not violated the old rules for writing either the prose or verse. I have not accepted the general dramatic technique which is approved by the Sanskrit dramatists. As for instance, the Nāndī; the appearance of Sūtradhar and Naṭī on the stage, following the Nāndī; the conventional opening of a play with the aid of a Sūtradhar and Naṭī, Bidūṣak (Jester), etc. Except in these points I think the Sanskrit drama is not essentially different from the European drama."[1] Then he proceeds to give a comparative estimate of the structural and technical characteristics of the English and Sanskrit drama. Mr. Yogīndra Nāth Basu criticized Tārā Chāṁd's play as being written in bad taste and indecent language and apparently classed it with the many vulgar Yātrās of those days.[2] In 1915, however, Mr. Śarat Chandra Ghoṣāl wrote two articles reviewing Tārā Chāṁd's play, with copious quotations from the text and showed that it was not in the least vitiated by vulgarities, either in style or subject-matter, as Mr. Basu had thought.[3] He further pointed out that it contained none of those obscenities which so often characterized the current Yātrās and which Rājā Rām Mohan Rāy had so justly condemned in his journal *Saṁbad-Kaumudī* of 1821. Mr. Ghoṣāl quoted Tārā Chāṁd's own words from the preface in support of his statement.[4] We cannot doubt that *Bhadrārjun* was inspired by quite a sincere desire in the author to give a clean and wholesome play to the educated Bengalis and to meet thereby a long-felt need. It is quite probable that Mr. Yogīndra Nāth Basu, as Mr. Ghoṣāl thinks, had perhaps never read the play and, therefore, had no justification to criticize it unfavourably from merely hearsay evidence.[5] Tārā Chāṁd himself was not entirely unaware of the true function of a drama, as it is clearly evident from his panegyric in verse in the manner of the English prologue, describing the superiority of dramatic art over all other arts, which he prefixed to his play.[6] But *Bhadrārjun* considered as a play is a very tawdry affair, and

[1] See *Narāyaṇ*, Māgh Number, 1321 B.S. or A.D. 1915, pp. 283–4.
[2] *Michael Madhu Sūdan Datter Jīban-Charit* (Life of Michael Madhu Sūdan Datta), 2nd ed., 1893, p. 161.
[3] See *Nārāyaṇ*, Māgh Number (pp. 283–91, and Chaitra Number (pp. 491–504), 1321 B.S. or A.D. 1915.
[4] See *Nārāyaṇ*, Māgh Number, 1321 B.S. or A.D. 1915, p. 289. [5] *Ibid.*
[6] *Ibid.*, p. 291.

is in no way comparable with *Kulīn-Kul-Sarbasva*. In fact, it is doubtful whether *Bhadrārjun* deserves the title of " drama " at all. The preponderance of narrative and poetry over dramatic action, which Tārā Chāṁd himself condemned in his preface as extremely harmful for a drama, marks his play from the beginning to the end. He makes his characters talk in poetry mostly in *payār* and *tripadī* rhymes like those of Kāśī Rām Dās's *Mahābhārata*. Conversation in prose is conspicuous by its absence. He does not excel in characterization either. The character of Draupadī undoubtedly offered him great possibilities of a dramatic unfolding of motive and in Satyabhāmā and Rukmiṇī, the two wives of Kṛṣṇa, he had the material for dramatic contrast. But Tārā Chāṁd made no use of these opportunities which were inherent in the original story, and simply crowded his play with long poetic narrations and florid descriptions of Arjuna's beauty and valour in highly metaphorical language. The work exhibits all the artificialities and rhetorical faults of the old Bengali style of the eighteenth century. Consequently, all this makes the play extremely uninteresting and dull. There are, however, one or two vivid and life-like domestic scenes in which he portrays the social practices and customs prevalent among the women of that time. We are not aware if *Bhadrārjun* was ever acted on the stage and this, perhaps, accounts for its comparative unimportance in the history of the Bengali drama. The main reason why *Kulīn-Kul-Sarbasva* has been more widely regarded as the first Bengali play is that it was the first to be successfully preformed on a regular stage.[1] When *Kulīn-Kul-Sarbasva* was produced for the first time, the people of Bengal were entertained by a play which was not only in their own language but was performed by their own people on a Bengali stage with all the requisites of scenic representation. In one respect and one alone does *Bhadrārjun* occupy a distinctive place in the development of the Bengali drama. It is the earliest known attempt to escape from the traditional methods of the Sanskrit playwrights and to experiment, however imperfectly, with the European form which afterwards became accepted by Bengali dramatists.

[1] See Chapter XII, p. 59.

There are other Bengali plays besides *Bhadrārjun* which have been asserted to be earlier than *Kulīn-Kul-Sarbasva*. In September, 1909 the question as to who was the first Bengali dramatist was raised in the columns of the *Indian Daily News*.[1] One correspondent who signed himself "One Who Knows" supported the claim of one Hara Chandra Ghoṣ, an inhabitant of Hoogly, and author of several Bengali works. "One Who Knows" maintained that Hara Chandra's play entitled *Bhānumatī Chittabilās* was published before *Bhadrārjun*. But the date of *Bhānumatī Chittabilās* cannot be definitely ascertained.[2] Moreover, it is not truly speaking an original Bengali play; it is only a Bengali translation of Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, the only difference being that the names of the *dramatis personæ* are given a Bengali form. Hara Chandra wrote another drama called *Chārumukh Chittaharā* which was similarly modelled on *Romeo and Juliet*. Mr. Amarendra Nāth Rāy, citing the authority of the *Sāhitya Pariṣat Patrikā* (The Journal of the Bengal Academy of Literature) mentions another play called *Prem Nāṭak* (A Drama on Love) written by one Pañchānan Bannerji, and presumably in 1820.[3] Dr. Dineś Chandra Sen speaks of it as the first printed Bengali drama.[4] Mr. S. C. Ghoṣāl claims to be the discoverer of this play and also mentions a second play by the same author called *Ramaṇī Nāṭak* (A Drama on Women).[5] Judging from the actual contents of both these plays, they cannot be seriously accepted as dramas in any sense. Plays of this kind, mostly on themes of irregular love and grossly vulgar subjects of similar nature, written in various old Bengali verse-forms, were quite numerous in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. They were a kind of by-product of the Yātrā and Vaiṣṇava erotic plays. All of them are admittedly earlier in date than *Kulīn-Kul-Sarbasva* but the question is not so much one of relative priority in date as of the nature of the works themselves. Large numbers

[1] See *Nārāyaṇ*, Chaitra Number, 1321 B.S. or A.D. 1915, footnote, p. 504.
[2] Mr. Hemendra Nāth Dās Gupta suggests 1852 as a probable date. (See *Forward*, 8th March, 1925.)
[3] See *Nārāyaṇ*, Phālgun Number, 1322 B.S. or A.D. 1916, p. 358.
[4] See *Nārāyaṇ*, Pouś Number, 1321 B.S. or A.D. 1915, p. 209.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 210.

of such productions may quite conceivably be discovered in the future, but it is not to be expected that any really serious rival will appear to challenge the claim made for *Kulīn-Kul-Sarbasva*. As a matter of fact, there is nothing to show that any of these earlier works were true dramas in the modern sense of the term, or that they exercised any real influence on the development of the modern Bengali drama. *Kulīn-Kul-Sarbasva* was, as we shall presently see, a serious work of art and may fairly be regarded as the earliest genuine Bengali drama.

CHAPTER XII

"Kulīn-Kul-Sarbasva"

Kulīn-Kul-Sarbasva was written for a prize-competition offered by a public-spirited zemindar, Kālī Chandra Rāy Chaudhurī of Kundi, a village in the district of Raṅgpur in Northern Bengal. The award was to be made to the best play in the Bengali language, exposing in a suitable manner the evils of polygamy and the iniquities of the Hindu social practice known as "Kaulīnya."[1] The competition was first advertised in a local Bengali newspaper called *Raṅgpur Bārtābaha* in its issue of the 6th Kārtik (September), 1853. Rām Nārāyaṇ Tarkratna's work was selected for the prize and the award was publicly announced. It was widely read and highly appreciated for its originality in the treatment of a theme of most controversial nature and greatly enjoyed for its bitterly sarcastic criticism of Hindu orthodoxy. It was frankly a propaganda play written with a definite purpose. In a brief magazine article[2] published in 1915, Mr. Aśvinī Kumār Gāṅgulī gives a short biographical memoir of Rām Nārāyaṇ and incidentally recounts many interesting episodes in the life of the author which are likely to have influenced his opinions against the "Kulīn" system and prepared him for the task he undertook in *Kulīn-Kul-Sarbasva*. Rām Nārāyaṇ was a learned Sanskrit scholar and was fully acquainted with the classical rules and

[1] "Kaulīnya" or "Kulīnism" is believed to have been instituted by Ballāl Seu (1109–1120). Owing to the complicated rules imposed by "Kulīnism" in regard to marriage between the four sections of the Brāhmaṇ caste, many Kulīn-Brāhmaṇ girls had to choose between being left unmarried and being married to men who had already one or more wives. Some Kulīn-Brāhmaṇs married a large number of women, most of whom would be very little more than nominal wives.

[2] See *Nārāyaṇ*, Agrahāyaṇ Number, 1322 B.S. or A.D. 1915–16, pp. 79–85.

canons of the Sanskrit drama.[1] So in composing his own play he strictly followed the form and structural arrangements of a Sanskrit play. For instance, he introduced the conventional " Nandī," " Prastābanā " and " Naṭ-Naṭī," and showed very little originality in the structural devices of the plot itself. There is practically no variety in the story, which is always made subservient to the exposition of the author's own opinions and criticisms. In a short preface to the play he gives a brief synopsis of the story. He divides it into six parts. In the first part he describes the worries and anxieties of Kulapālak, a father of four daughters of marriageable age. In the second, he unfolds the hypocrisy and trickery of the match-makers. The third part is taken up with a description of the social usages and customs observed by Bengali women at the time of a marriage ceremony. In the fourth is narrated how the " Kulīn " system of marriage is merely selfish bargaining. The fifth part consists of pure fun, thrown in by way of relief to the story of the pathetic condition of a widower wanting to marry again; and in the sixth he describes in detail the Hindu marriage ceremony itself. The author, however, does not strictly follow his own divisions of the play and is not at all consistent in the development of the plot. He introduces a large number of relevant and irrelevant episodes and shows excessive fondness for digressions. He makes no serious attempt at characterization

[1] Roughly speaking, there were two kinds of drama in ancient India, the heroic drama (like Kālidāsa's *Vikromorvaśī* or Bhavabhūti's *Uttar-Rām-Charita*) in which the story is drawn from history or mythology, and the drama of pure invention (such as Bhavabhūti's *Mālatī Mādhava* or Śūdraka's *Mṛchha Kaṭikā*). The inventive range of a dramatist, whether attempting the first kind or the second, was circumscribed by certain canons of Sanskrit dramaturgy. The rules most generally recognized may be summarized as follows :—

The title of the play must be formed by compounding the names of hero and heroine.

The scene must be laid in India.

The hero must appear in every act. He may be a Brāhmaṇ, minister or merchant.

The heroine may be a lady of noble family or a courtesan. The two may occasionally share honours, provided they do not meet.

The play may be "full of rascals."

The passions generally portrayed are to be love and heroism.

The drama may be a mixture of sensuousness and sorrow, levity and laughter. In no case, however, is tragedy permissible. The ending must be happy.

or dramatic motivation. The characters represent types rather than real men and women. We do not feel that they are drawn clearly enough to serve as convincing instruments in a developing action. The dialogue is sparkling and highly entertaining at times, especially in the comic scenes, but otherwise, it is flat and merely declamatory. The style is noisy and the prose highly involved and artificial. In fact, the material of the play is more suited for dialectic than drama. Many of the leading incidents in the story are not even capable of being translated into dramatic action. The play, therefore, lacks action, not only physical but mental and psychological as well. But it must not be forgotten that all faults apart, this sort of play was a great innovation in its own time. It marked a departure for the first time from all the artificial expository devices of the Yātrā, its set types of character and all the usual tricks which are the stock-in-trade of the Yātrāwālās. The plot itself, however defective in its dramatic handling, was not in the least hackneyed and Rām Nārāyaṇ was the first to make a serious attempt at holding "the mirror up to nature" without having recourse to the extra-human and super-natural devices of some of the Yātrās, and thereby giving a picture of real life and real events. The author is very caustic and bitter in his sarcasm and his language becomes at times unnecessarily abusive. He has wit but no humour, for humour implies, as Carlyle said, a certain "sympathy with the seamy side of things." Rām Nārāyaṇ is a comedian, only intellectually. He exposes incongruities and hypocrisies, but the way in which he does this, lacks breadth and geniality. He arouses our laughter but this laughter is not always hearty, wholesome and kind. Moreover, the artistic unity of the play is very often spoiled by too much inconsequential and inopportune laughter. We are vastly amused, no doubt, but laughter is not perhaps the sole object of comedy. "We do not laugh at mountains or the sea," says Mr. Lafcadio Hearn, and the incongruities and frailties of humanity should not alone make us laugh. Rām Nārāyaṇ shows in a remarkable degree his acute perception of whatever is wrong and ridiculous but he does not seem to be able to make us feel and enjoy "the almighty joke." There is an over-

indulgence in witticisms, which produces quite an unnatural atmosphere. Never for a moment do we feel that we are living in the same world as his characters, which are, in fact, only caricatures and " extravagant tautologies of themselves," as Hazlitt would say, and they seem to exist only for a definite moral purpose. Rām Nārāyaṇ is a reformer, like Ben Jonson and Molière, if we may be allowed the comparison and as ardent a propagandist as Mr. Bernard Shaw. But his satire which cuts so much at the roots of the fashions and customs of his own time, ignores, however, the one important fact that men and women of his day were hedged in by a civilization which was not entirely meaningless. John Bunyan perhaps understood the true secret of that very elusive quality called humour when he remarked that " some things are of that nature as to make one's fancy chuckle while the heart doth ache." Rām Nārāyaṇ did not realize that humour might be capable of sincere emotion and not purely intellectual and destructive. The fact is that his play depicted conditions which existed only in his own time and, consequently, does not appeal to us to-day.

The first performance of *Kulīn-Kul-Sarbasva* took place in the house of Jay Rām Basāk at Charakḍāṅgā, in the neighbourhood of Pāthuriāghāṭā, Calcutta in March, 1857. Several old members of the " Oriental Theatre " company were among its principal organizers. Bihārī Lāl Chatterji, who afterwards became famous as an actor and the dramatic director of the " Bengal Theatre," [1] made his début in this performance in a female rôle. A modern Bengali critic writes that " the play was mounted with all the novelty that latest designs of stage could produce. Its originality, combined with the excellence of its drapery, forthwith gained the applause of the people and expectation ran high with regard to the immediate production of further original plays." [2]

[1] See Chapter XXI, pp. 116 ff.

[2] Śyāmā Prasād Mukherji, "The Bengali Theatre" (*The Calcutta Review*, January, 1924), p. 114.

CHAPTER XIII

Sanskrit Plays

The appearance of *Kulīn-Kul-Sarbasva* was followed by a period during which more attention was given to the translation of well-known Sanskrit plays into Bengali than to the production of original plays in the vernacular. The interest in English plays and English play-houses had already begun to die out. Even English translations of Sanskrit plays were no longer liked by the people. The day after the performance of *Kulīn-Kul-Sarbasva*, a Bengali version of Kālidāsa's *Śakuntalā* was staged at the private residence of Aśutoṣ Deb at Simlā (a district of Calcutta). Mahārājā Yatīndra Mohan Tagore and the two brothers, the Rājās Īśvar Chandra and Pratāp Chandra Siṁha of Pāikpāṛā were among the distinguished visitors. Though the performance [1] did not quite come up to the expectation that had been aroused, people found in it, at least for the time being, something more original and more interesting than the stereotyped performances of the older sort, such as the Yātrā and the Pāṁchāli, of which they were getting tired. The following excerpt from Paṇḍit Rām Nārāyaṇ Tarkaratna's preface to *Ratnāvalī* shows the way in which the more advanced amongst the Bengali community at this time regarded those older kinds of performance: "After having tasted the incomparable delights of Sanskrit and English plays written in charming language, everybody is beginning to show disregard for the despised Yātrās of the present day. Who that has tasted of the cup of nectar pure as the moon cares for stale rice-water?" [2] About two years later (1859)

[1] "Jouée par des acteurs de hasard ignorants des antiques traditions, la pièce manque son effet; mais la tentative n'en provoque pas moins une noble émulation." p. 397, *Le Théâtre Indien*.

[2] See Yogīndra Nāth Basu, *Michael Madhu Sūdan Datter Jīban-Charit* (Life of Michael Madhu Sūdan Datta), p. 214, footnote.

a second performance of *Śakuntalā* took place at the Āhirīṭolā residence of Chandra Nāth Mukherji, a zemindar of Janai, before a distinguished gathering. The Magistrate of Serampore, the poet Īśvar Chandra Gupta, Kālī Prasanna Siṁha, Paṇḍit Dvārākā Nāth Vidyābhuṣaṇ and Sarat Chandra Ghoṣ were present. Appreciations of this performance appeared in the Bengali journals, *Saṁbād-Prabhākar* and *Bhaskar*. In July, 1867, there was a third performance at a private house at Kāṁśārīpāṛā in the vicinity of Bhawānīpur (a suburb of Calcutta). But on this occasion the show was far from satisfactory. Two other productions in 1867 under private enterprise deserve mention. The first was of a Bengali version of Bhaṭṭa Nārāyaṇa's *Veṇī Saṁhāra* in April in the house of Kālī Prasanna Siṁha at Joṛāsāṁko. The theme of *Veṇī Saṁhāra* is taken from the "Sabhā Parba" of the *Mahābhārata*, in which is described the revenge which the five Pāṇḍava brothers wreaked on their rivals, the Kauravas, for having been unlawfully deprived of their kingdom by the latter. A contemporary critic, Kiśorī Chaṁd Mitra wrote that "the play was well acted and the principal characters were admirably sustained."[1] Kālī Prasanna Siṁha who himself was a very brilliant actor personally supervised the performance. Professor Lévi refers to the skill with which he staged the play and the great success which he attained.[2] Mr. W. C. Bonnerji, a well-known Bengali barrister, was one of the actors and Bihārī Lāl Chatterji again appeared in this play in one of the principal rôles. Largely encouraged by this success, about eight months later, Kālī Prasanna Siṁha made arrangements again at his own house for another play. On this occasion his choice fell on Kālidāsa's *Vikramorvaśī* which he himself had translated into Bengali. The subject-matter of this play is the fascinating tale of the love of King Pururabā for the celestial beauty Urvaśī, banished from heaven. Kālī Prasanna appeared in the rôle of Pururabā. The audience included Sir Cecil Beadon, then the Secretary to the Government of India, and several other English officials. Each of these performances

[1] "The Modern Hindu Drama" (see vol. lvii of *The Calcutta Review*, 1873), p. 253.

[2] *Le Théâtre Indien*, p. 397.

under private enterprise was only the affair of one evening, taking place on a stage temporarily erected for the purpose and dismantled as soon as the play was over. In the beginning these well-to-do patrons of the stage, however keen their enthusiasm and enterprise, never thought it worth while to have a continuous series of such performances.

CHAPTER XIV

Rām Nārāyaṇ Tarkaratna

(1823–85)

As a pioneer of the modern Bengali drama Rām Nārāyaṇ's place in history is certainly unique. He was perhaps not strictly speaking the first Bengali dramatist but he was most assuredly the first great dramatist of Bengal. He was an innovator and born with an instinctive genius for play-writing. His *Kulīn-kul-Sarbasva* was an epoch-making work both as a written and as an acted drama. As Rām Nārāyaṇ's popularity increased, the people of Bengal gave him the appellation of " Nāṭuke Rām Nārāyaṇ " (Rām Nārāyaṇ, the dramatist). Besides being the author of *Kulīn-kul-Sarbasva* and the translator of several well-known Sanskrit dramas, he wrote three other original plays in Bengali—*Naba-Nāṭak* (The New Drama), *Rukmiṇī-Haraṇ* (The Rape of Rukmiṇī) and *Svapna-dhaṇ* (The Dream-Treasure). Of these three, *Naba-Nāṭak* brought him the widest popularity. Like *Kulīn-kul-Sarbasva*, it also was a prize composition and a propaganda play. The story of its origin [1] is well worth recounting here briefly. A prize of two hundred rupees was offered by Jyotirindra Nāth Tagore [2] and his friends for the best original Bengali play on a social topic to be staged under the auspices of a dramatic association of their own. This association was quite exclusive and consisted

[1] See Basanta Kumār Chatterji, " Jyotirindra Nāther Jīban-Smṛti " (The Life and Reminiscences of Jyotirindra Nāth), *Bhāratī*, a Bengali literary monthly, Bhādra Number, 1321 B.S. or A.D. 1914–15.

[2] " By the death of Jyotirindra Nāth Tagore, at the age of seventy-six, Bengal loses one of the few surviving members of an earlier generation of Bengalis who were inspired by the love of motherland and who tried to serve their countrymen in various fields of culture as well as of business enterprise. He wrote some original plays in Bengali which were very popular in their day, both among readers and playgoers. One of these plays, *Puruvikram*, received high praise from Professor Sylvain Lévi in its Gujrati translation, the learned reviewer mistaking the translation for original production." (*The Modern Review*, April, 1925, vol. xxxvii, No. 4, p. 485.)

Also see Rabindra Nāth Tagore, *My Reminiscences*, pp. 126–8, 140–7.

only of five members, Kṛṣṇa Bihārī Sen (younger brother of the well-known social and religious reformer, Keśab Chandra Sen), Guṇendra Nāth Tagore (elder brother of Jyotirindra Nāth), Akṣay Chandra Chaudhurī, Jadu Nāth Mukherji (brother-in-law of Jyotirindra Nāth) and Jyotirindra Nāth himself. The aim of these young men was the promotion and advancement of music, drama and the fine arts generally in Bengal. They wanted to stage a play privately under their own auspices. Failing to find a Bengali play suitable for their purpose, they advertised an offer of a prize for one. They received several Bengali plays submitted for selection but none of these seemed either suitable or of sufficiently high standard to please them. In these circumstances they were advised by their patron Gaṇendra Nāth Tagore, to ask Paṇḍit Rām Nārāyaṇ Tarkaratna to write a play for them. The Paṇḍit readily consented and wrote *Naba-Nāṭak*, which they accepted, raising the amount of the award to five hundred rupees. When the play was ready to be staged they held a reception in honour of the author at the Joṛāsaṁko residence of the Tagores and to it they invited a number of Bengali gentlemen of rank and literary standing. Tarkaratna read his play before the guests amidst great applause. At the performance itself on the 6th January, 1867, enthusiasm ran high and the author himself was pleased beyond measure at the reception given to his work. In a moment of elation Rām Nārāyaṇ is said to have burst out with the remark as a reply to some of his critics: "The scoundrels always say that there's no plot in my plays; let them come now and see this one." [1] As a matter of fact, *Naba-Nāṭak* was a much more consistently constructed play than *Kulīn-kul-Sarbasva*, although its story lacks the variety of the earlier work. This the author also admits in his dedicatory note to the play, remarking awhile that *Naba-Nāṭak* was an attack, pure and simple, upon polygamy.[2] The play ends rather abruptly in a kind of tragic anti-climax, mainly on account of a disproportionate indulgence in satirical wit and banter. In making this play a tragedy, Rām Nārāyāṇ boldly ignored one of the fundamental laws of Sanskrit

[1] See *Bhāratī*, Bhādra Number, 1321 B.S. or A.D. 1914–15.
[2] See *Nārāyaṇ*, Phālgun Number, 1322 B.S. or A.D. 1915–16, p. 368.

dramaturgy (viz., that the ending of a play must never be tragic). This was rather surprising, as he had never before shown any tendency to break away from the classical canons of the Hindu drama. *Naba-Nāṭak* consists of six acts. The story is briefly this. Gabeś Babu marries a second time while his first wife is still living. The son of his first wife leaves home, unable to endure the cruel way in which his step-mo ther treats him. The first wife afterwards commits suicide. In the end Gabeś Babu dies of poison administered by his newly married wife. So the play has in it substantial material to evoke a good deal of tragic sentiment and pity.

In 1867, Rām Nārāyaṇ published his Bengali translation of *Mālatī-Mādhava* which, like all the translations of the author, was quite admirably done. He introduced into it several Bengali songs composed by Banoārī Lāl Rāy, to whom he made an acknowledgment in a prefatory notice to the work. In 1871, Rām Nārāyaṇ wrote *Rukmiṇī Haraṇ*, which was prefaced by a dedication in Sanskrit to Mahārājā Yatīndra Mohan Tagore. The play has five acts and its theme is drawn from a well-known Paurāṇic episode. It contains among other things a very interesting and life-like picture of a typical Bengali Brāhmaṇ of small means. The Brāhmaṇ stammers and his speeches furnish the greatest fun in the play. Rām Nārāyaṇ's last play was *Svapna-Dhaṇ*, which appeared in 1873. It was first published by a village dramatic society named "Śimuliā Raṅgabhūmi." Fragments of this play have recently been re-discovered,[1] but only the first part is available in a complete form. Rām Nārāyaṇ died in 1885, at the age of sixty-three.

[1] Re-discovered by Mr. Amarendra Nāth Rāy. See *Nārāyaṇ*, Phālgun Number, 1322 B.S. or A.D. 1915–16, pp. 355 and 369.

THE BENGALI THEATRES

CHAPTER XV

The Belgāchhiā Theatre

It is said that on the night of the first performance of *Śakuntalā* in the house of Aśutoṣ Deb at Simlā,[1] Mahārājā Yatīndra Mohan Tagore came to Rājā Īśvar Chandra Siṁha at the end of the play and said to him, "I think it would be much better to build a permanent theatre instead of spending so much money over a night or two's entertainment; what do you say?"[2] Rājā Īśvar Chandra, who had shown a keen interest in all the Bengali plays hitherto performed, was greatly impressed by this suggestion. He consulted his elder brother, Pratāp Chandra, who welcomed the idea. A site was chosen without delay in the beautiful garden residence at Belgāchhiā, which the Rājās had only lately purchased from Prince Dvārakā Nāth Tagore. Rājā Īśvar Chandra volunteered to bear the cost of the construction of the stage and the expense of its maintenance. The Rājās asked Paṇḍit Rām Nārāyaṇ Tarkaratna to write a new play for the opening performance. This time the Paṇḍit decided to adapt rather than to make a literal translation of a suitable Sanskrit play. He chose Śrī Harṣa's *Ratnāvalī*, because he considered it to be admirably suited to the modern stage. The incidents in the play are essentially of a domestic nature and the characters are thoroughly human and not divine or semi-divine as in some of the older Sanskrit plays. Whatever the date of Śrī Harṣa may be (and on this point we have no certain knowledge), *Ratnāvalī* appears to be distinctly more modern in tone and spirit and in the social conditions depicted therein, than the plays of either Kālidāsa or Bhavabhūti. Guru Dayāl Chaudhurī, a friend and disciple of the poet Īśvar Chandra

[1] See Chap. XIII, p. 61.

[2] See Yogīndra Nāth Basu, *Michael Madhu Sūdan Datter Jīban-Charit* (Life of Michael Madhu Sūdan Datta), chap. viii, pp. 214–15.

Gupta and also a well-known musical composer, wrote some lyrics for the play and set them to appropriate music. Keśab Chandra Gāṅgulī undertook to coach the actors and to superintend the rehearsals. The performance took place on the 31st July, 1858. The success of this first play to be presented in a permanent Bengali theatre was unprecedented. On the first two nights the audience was exclusively Bengali, but on the third and fourth, the Rājās invited their numerous European friends and several prominent men from the Jewish and Parsi communities of Calcutta. An English translation was made by Michael Madhu Sūdan Datta and distributed to the non-Bengali visitors. The Lieutenant-Governor Sir Frederick Halliday was among the audience, which also included several judges of the Calcutta High Court, Commissioners, Magistrates and a number of other Government officials. Paṇḍit Īśvar Chandra Vidyāsāgar and Justice Hariś Chandra Mukherji were among the numerous prominent Bengalis who were present. Bengal owes a deep debt of gratitude to the two Rājās for their notable share in the establishment and development of the theatre in Bengal. There was no one else among the aristocrats of Bengal in those days, who showed such liberality and such devotion to the cause of learning and the arts. Not only the drama but every institution for the promotion of social reform and public welfare owed much to the munificence and practical interest of these two noblemen. Madhu Sūdan Datta said of the Rājās: "Should the drama ever again flourish in India, posterity will not forget these two noble gentlemen—the earliest friends of our rising national theatre."[1] How great was Rājā Īśvar Chandra's zeal for the cause of the Bengali drama is revealed in one of his letters (dated the 11th July, 1857) to his friend, Gour Dās Basāk who had failed to appear at one of the rehearsals. The Rājā wrote: "I am really ashamed at your conduct. You are the friend who is determined to put me to shame, not only before the amateur company, with which we have identified ourselves, but the audience that we expect on the night of the performance. Barring yourself, there is not a single individual who trifles

[1] See Y. M. Basu, *Michael Madhu Sūdan Datter Jīban-Charit*, p. 218.

or absents himself from the stage on the rehearsal night . . . you must know that after so much trouble, anxiety, expense, and what not, I am not the man to abandon the idea or throw the theatre and all to the dogs. No ; call me a fool or vagabond or any name you wish, I am not so silly as to relinquish one of my favourite hobbies, the drama. I am in right earnest and must perform my part and have the play acted out, notwithstanding the difficulties friends like you put in the way. Now be plain once for all, and tell me that you will not absent yourself again." [1] In another letter dated the 27th August, 1857, written to Keśab Chandra Gāṅgulī, he tells the story of how *Ratnāvalī* came to be written. He also speaks of the many difficulties in the way of its production, but without the least suggestion of despair. In one place he writes : " But alas ! a strange fatality hangs about *Rutnabullee*. Although not a firm believer in astrology, I am half-inclined to believe that we commenced at a time when some strange stars were in the ascendant . . . You might say it is impossible (i.e. to produce the play in face of these difficulties), but I will prove it, and before positive proof every objection must give way." [2] Indeed the Rājā was true to his words, and the unexpected success of *Ratnāvalī* was his fitting reward. Except for the unshaken faith in the future of the Bengali drama which inspired the Rājās and those who collaborated with them, the infant Bengali theatre could never have come to its own.

Ratnāvalī was the first play to be performed in Bengal to the accompaniment of an " orchestra " or rather a concert-party. The want of suitable musical accompaniment had been felt for some time and the suggestion of forming a national "orchestra" with Indian instruments of different kinds, like the original proposal for a permanent stage, came from the Mahārājā Yatīndra Mohan Tagore. The Mahārājā was himself a noted musician and one of the strongest supporters of the revival of Hindu music on scientific lines. Some of his works of musical criticism may be regarded as permanent and authoritative

[1] See Y. N. Basu, *Michael Madhu Sūdan Datter Jīban-Charit*, p. 218–19, footnote.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 219–22, footnote.

contributions to the study of music. So under Mahārājā Yatīndra Tagore's patronage and under the able guidance of Kṣetra Mohan Gosvāmī, a well-known teacher of Hindu music, a concert-party was formed for the "Belgāchhiā Theatre." Fine music combined with equally fine acting on an up-to-date stage, and with appropriate scenery and costumes, all contributed to the remarkable success of *Ratnāvalī*. One Rām Chatterji, a rather lukewarm enthusiast for Bengali theatres, is said to have described the performance in the following words: "Everybody was enchanted, and even I, for a few moments,—I who am naturally cynical about many things."[1] Kiśorī Chāṁd Mitra, a contemporary literary critic wrote: "The *tout ensemble* was like a fairy scene, and added considerably to the charm and *éclat* of the dramatic entertainment."[2] In fact, the establishment of the "Belgāchhiā Theatre" may be regarded as a real landmark in the history of the Bengali Theatre. The Rājās and their co-workers not only established a national theatre with a national "orchestra" but impressed the people with a sense of the real value of the theatre as a national institution. The "Belgāchhiā Theatre" gathered round it not only Paṇḍits and men of classical learning but able and energetic youths with an English education, prepared to move forward with the times.

[1] See Y. N. Basu, *Michael Madhu Sūdan Datter Jīban-Charit*, p. 222.
[2] "The Modern Hindu Drama," *The Calcutta Review*, vol. lvii, 1873, p. 255–6.

CHAPTER XVI

Michael Madhu Sūdan Datta
(1824–73)

(*a*) *His Serious Plays*

Madhu Sūdan Datta's first contact with the new theatre movement in Bengal came, as we have already seen,[1] through his English translation of *Ratnāvalī* for the "Belgāchhiā Theatre." Out of this developed an intimate friendship with the Rajās of Pāikpāṛā and Madhu Sūdan became an enthusiastic supporter of the theatre at Belgāchhiā. His English translation of *Ratnāvalī*, though it received unqualified praise from the Bengali Press,[2] was really insignificant from a literary point of view. But it was quite an important event in the early literary career of Madhu Sūdan himself. For in preparing this translation he unexpectedly discovered his own gift for dramatic composition. Moreover, his regular attendance at the several performances and rehearsals of this play developed his innate sympathy with the drama as acted, and his stage-sense. Very soon he realized that a play like *Ratnāvalī* on an entirely Sanskrit model was far from meeting the requirements of the modern stage. Both in the Sanskrit original of Śrī Harṣa and in the Bengali translation of Rām Nārāyaṇ, it is rather a defective piece of work. In its original form it lacks dramatic concentration and unity, and Rām Nārāyaṇ was not successful in improving on his model. It is not surprising, therefore, that Madhu Sūdan should have felt the unreality and flatness of the *Ratnāvalī* performances. At one of the rehearsals, he remarked to his friend, Gour Dās Basāk, that it was most unfortunate that the Rājās should spend so much money over such an insignificant

[1] Chap. XV, p. 68.

[2] Rām Chandra Chatterji, the Editor of *Bengal Harkara*, specially commented on the merits of Madhu Sūdan's English style.

and worthless play.[1] Gour Dās appears to have suggested that it was not so easy to find a really good Bengali play. After a moment's pause Madhu Sūdan exclaimed, "A good play? Why, I will write one myself."[2] Madhu Sūdan's sudden and impulsive resolution greatly amused Gour Dās, who knew that Madhu Sūdan had at that time a very imperfect knowledge of the Bengali language itself. He had, of course, shown considerable ability as a writer in English since his student days in the Hindu College. Later he had embraced Christianity and completely alienated himself from all social and literary movements of Bengal. He had gone away to Madras and spent a number of years there. He had already adopted English ways and habits and imbibed Western ideas. He had not taken the trouble to study the Bengali language and literature, which he despised. He was quite candidly proud of his English education and of his ability to write and speak good English. He could not even write a letter in Bengali without making bad mistakes in spelling and composition. Gour Dās, however, did not want to discourage him, but said, "All right, you try if you want to." Madhu Sūdan's enthusiasm was not in the least damped by this sort of half-hearted sympathy from his friend. Immediately he set himself to the task in right earnest; he procured some Sanskrit plays and treatises and read them thoroughly. In a few days he had already written out the preliminary parts of a play which he called *Śarmiṣṭhā*. He took the manuscript to Gour Dās Basāk. It came as a real surprise to Gour Dās, who forthwith showed it to the Rājās and Mahārājā Yatīndra Mohan Tagore, who were greatly impressed with the merits of the work even in its unfinished form. Encouraged by this favourable reception, Madhu Sūdan completed the play. The two outstanding characteristics which mark all of Madhu Sūdan's dramatic works, namely, his independence of Indian tradition and his adoption of Western models, were instantly revealed in *Śarmiṣṭhā*, though not so completely as in most of his later work. Naturally, *Śarmiṣṭhā* met with very severe criticism from the orthodox school of Bengali critics.

[1] See Y. N. Basu, *Michael Madhu Sūdan Datter Jīban-Charit*, pp. 228–30.
[2] *Ibid.*

The greatest exponent of the orthodox school at this time was Mahāmahopādhyāy Prem Chāṁd Tarkabāgīś. He was a learned classical scholar and a professor of the Sanskrit College. On questions of dramatic art and literary criticism, his opinions were everywhere accepted as final. He was, therefore, requested by the Rājās to revise, and if necessary, correct Madhu Sūdan's play before it was staged. The learned Tarkabāgīś read only a little portion of the work and then sent it back with the following trenchant comment: "This is no drama at all, according to Sanskrit models. I can't correct it without spoiling it. And that I don't wish to do. I believe it comes from the pen of some English-educated young man of modern ideas." [1] But the modern school of Bengali critics whose spokesman were thc Rājās of Pāikpāṛā and the Tagores, on the contrary, welcomed it as a play of exceptional merit. In fact, they did not much care whether a play was written strictly in accordance with Sanskrit rules or not. So *Śarmiṣṭhā* was finally accepted for the "Belgāchhiā Theatre" and Mahārājā Yatīndra Mohan Tagore composed several songs for the play. *Śarmiṣṭhā* was published at the expense of the Rājās.

How thoroughly Madhu Sūdan was imbued with Western ideas of play-writing and what a great contempt he had for all those Bengali Pandits who could tolerate nothing that departed from the recognized canons of Sanskrit drama, is evident from some of the letters which he wrote to his friends before the publication of *Śarmiṣṭhā*. At the request of some of his friends he had gone to Rām Nārāyaṇ and shown him the play and Rām Nārāyaṇ had made certain suggestions for its improvement. But Madhu Sūdan, always of a very independent spirit, strongly resented the suggestions and wrote to Gour Dās Basak as follows: "You must excuse me for not complying with your request. The fact is, I do not like the idea of showing my play to our friends in so incomplete a statc. . . . Rām Nārāyaṇ's 'version', as you justly call it, disappoints me. I have at once made up my mind to reject his aid. I shall either stand or fall by myself. I did not wish Rām Nārāyaṇ to recast my sentences—most assuredly not. I only requested him to correct grammatical blunders,

[1] See Y. N. Basu, *Michael Madhu Sūdan Datter Jīban-Charit*, p. 229.

if any. You know that a man's style is the reflection of his mind, and I am afraid there is but little congeniality between our friend and my poor self. However, I shall adopt some of his corrections. If you should speak of the drama to your friends, when you meet them to-day, pray don't say a word about Rām Nārāyaṇ. I shan't have him. He has made my poor girls talk d——d cold prose." [1] Speaking in the same letter about his deliberate adoption of the European form of drama, Madhu Sūdan wrote: "I am aware, my dear fellow, that there will, in all likelihood, be something of a foreign air about my drama; but if the language be not ungrammatical, if the thoughts be just and glowing, the plot interesting, the characters well maintained, what care I if there be a foreign air about the thing? Do you dislike Moore's poetry because it is full of Orientalism? Byron's poetry for its Asiatic air, Carlyle's prose for its Germanism? Besides, remember that I am writing for that portion of my countrymen who think as I think, whose minds have been more or less imbued with Western ideas and modes of thinking; and that *it is my intention to throw off the fetters forged for us by a servile admiration of everything Sanskrit.* . . . In matters literary, old boy, I am too proud to stand before the world in borrowed clothes . . . Don't let thy soul be perturbed, for I promise you a play that will astonish . . . the Pandits . . . I have no objection to allow a few alterations and so forth, but recast all my sentences—the Devil! I would sooner burn the thing." [2] Yet, curiously enough, Madhu Sūdan in his first play *Śarmiṣṭhā* could not entirely free himself from the "fetters" which he considered "forged for us by a servile admiration of everything Sanskrit." No doubt he did away with some of the Sanskrit conventions like "Nāndī" and "Prastābanā" and instead of introducing "Sūtradhar" or "Naṭ-Naṭī," he conveniently put his first words in the play into the mouth of one of his *dramatis personae.* He did not also observe any of the minute distinctions between acts and scenes or attempt to invest his characters with all the specific attributes which

[1] See *Michael Madhu Sūdan Datter Jīban-Charit,* Letter No. 15 (undated), pp. 230–32.

[2] See *Michael Madhu Sūdan Datter Jīban-Charit,* pp. 231–2.

are required by the laws of the Sanskrit drama. But there is not the slightest doubt that he was influenced, to a very large extent, by *Ratnāvalī* not only in the conception of the central story but also in its main structure and technique. The similarities between *Śarmiṣṭhā* and *Ratnāvalī* are, indeed, too many to be overlooked. In both the plays, we have two women rivals and all the complications that arise out of the problem of "eternal triangle." These two women, again, are also given qualities and defects of a very similar nature, and their language exhibits the same turns and expressions in joy and grief alike. The *dénoûement* is exactly similar, bringing happiness to both women after they have experienced painful jealousies and heart-burnings. The hero of one play is, in fact, the exact counterpart of the hero of the other, most noticeably in his weaknesses. Not only in these various details of the plot itself, but in the general tone and atmosphere of his play, Madhu Sūdan scrupulously imitates the fashion set by Rām Nārāyaṇ in his *Ratnāvalī*. So, in reality, Madhu Sūdan obeys rules which he never wanted to obey and follows conventions which he affected to despise. *Ratnāvalī* had, indeed, left such a deep impression on his mind that he consciously or unconsciously imitated its dramatic devices and technique. No doubt, *Śarmiṣṭhā* marked a revolt against classical traditions, but the revolt was more in spirit than in form, and more in the nature of aspiration than fulfilment. The importance of *Śarmiṣṭhā* in the history of the Bengali drama is, however, due to its being the first attempt at a departure from the old style and the first product of Madhu Sūdan's dramatic genius. It was first through *Śarmiṣṭhā*, and then through other dramas which followed it, that Madhu Sūdan discovered his literary powers. His plays were also the precursors of his immortal epics and poems, on which and which alone perhaps rests the permanent reputation of Madhu Sūdan Datta as one of the greatest literary men that modern Bengal has produced.

The story of *Śarmiṣṭhā* is taken from an episode in the *Mahābhārata* and centres round King Yayāti, son of Nahuṣ. The main enveloping actions in the story arise, firstly, from the situation created by a sudden quarrel between Śarmiṣṭhā

(the daughter of the King of the Demons) and Devayānī (the daughter of Śukrāchāryya, court-priest to the King of the Demons) and secondly, from the marriage of Devayānī to King Yayāti and Yayāti's passion for Śarmiṣṭhā. Śarmiṣṭhā throws Devayānī into a well, out of which she is rescued by King Yayāti, who happens to pass that way when hunting. The sage Śukrāchāryya, extremely angry at this insult to his daughter, goes to the King of the Demons, curses him and threatens to leave his court. The Demon-King propitiates the sage by condescending to make his daughter Śarmiṣṭhā the slave of Devayānī for life. Śarmiṣṭhā accepts her fate and leads a miserable life of servitude, until King Yayāti meets her, falls in love with her, and secretly marries her. The Queen Devayānī goes away in anger and implores her father to curse the king with life-long decrepitude. Devayānī afterwards repents for having brought such a miserable curse on her husband and begs her father to take the curse back. The sage revokes the curse on condition that it shall descend on one of the King's children. So the King becomes well again, and in the end the sage delivers Śarmiṣṭhā from slavery to his daughter and makes King Yayāti accept them both as his queens. The first scene opens on the Himālayas and shows the palace of Indra, the King of Heaven. A demon, dressed as a warrior, appears and talks about the war that is raging between the gods and the demons, and lets us know that he has been commissioned by his chief to spy on the movements of the gods. This opening device is perhaps the most dramatic point in the whole play. It was not only an invention of Madhu Sūdan's own but it showed his real superiority over his contemporaries and rivals. But the play, as a whole, suffers from two very great defects. In the first place, all his characters seem to be in a state of complete undevelopment; and secondly, his language is very artificial and often unnecessarily poetic. His characters do not seem to develop naturally out of the conditions he depicts. Again and again the story has to be made clear by means of long prose narrations, which is one of the stereotyped methods of the Yātrā itself. There is practically no inter-play of dramatic action except such as follows inevitably from the external circumstances.

The sorrows of Śarmiṣṭhā hardly arouse our sympathy. Her character as depicted in the *Mahābhārata* is much more full of genuine pathos. Perhaps one of the most dramatic incidents in the original story is the scene in which Śarmiṣṭhā receives the sentence of banishment from her father. There she appears before our eyes great in her fortitude, noble in her surrender, and sweet in her pathetic tenderness. But Madhu Sūdan failed to avail himself of this excellent dramatic opportunity. The reason was that he had not, at this period, fully realized the dramatic value of those little touches and little subtle suggestions by which characters in a drama are developed. Otherwise he would not have made his characters indulge in those long narrative speeches which, though quite poetic sometimes, are hardly effective dramatically. The beautifully worded similes and metaphors fall quite flat when spoken on the stage. The most sparkling dialogues in the play are between Bidūṣak (Court Jester) and Naṭī (Dancing Girl). These are quite dramatic in their effect, and they serve as a kind of relief to those other highly Sanskritized and wordy speeches. Paṇḍit Rāngati Nyāyaratna, an orthodox critic, takes serious objection to the scenes between Bidūṣak and Naṭī.[1] The Paṇḍit finds them extremely annoying. But, in fact, those scenes are the only ones in the play which are really living and vivid on the stage. Madhu Sūdan is also to a great extent successful in the delineation of his women in this play. Although Śarmiṣṭhā and Devayānī do not come out as full-length portraits, they possess a great deal of that vitality and animation which found still more perfect expression in " Pramīlā " of his epic *Meghnād Badh Kāvya*. When we take into consideration the circumstances in which *Śarmiṣṭhā* was produced, we cannot help feeling that it was a very remarkable achievement so far as it went. It is amazing how Madhu Sūdan, who had never previously taken the trouble to study Bengali at all seriously, was able to show in his very first work such command over Bengali style and such resourcefulness in his choice of words. Indeed, it was after the publication of *Śarmiṣṭhā* that

[1] *Bāṅglā Bhāṣā O Sāhityā Biṣayak Prastāb* (A Discourse on Bengali Language and Literature), p. 259.

Madhu Sūdan was first recognized as a Bengali writer. He also made an English translation of *Śarmiṣṭhā*. This is what he wrote to Gour Dās concerning the translation: "I have nearly finished the translation of *Śarmiṣṭhā*. If I am to believe all those who have seen it—among them are the Rājās and Tagore—it will materially add to the little reputation that *Ratnāvalī* has given me. Every one says it is superior to that book." "As to the Bengali original," Madhu Sūdan continues, "the only fault found with it is that the language is a little too high for such audiences as we may expect now to patronise it. This, I need scarcely tell you, is nothing; for if the book is destined to occupy a permanent place in the literature of the country, it will not be condemned on this head twenty years hence, as everyone is learning Bengali. To tell you the candid truth, I never thought I was capable of doing so much all at once. This *Śarmiṣṭhā* has very nearly put me at the head of all Bengali writers. People talk of its poetry with rapture. But you must judge for yourself."[1] The fault of the book does not lie so much, as some of his contemporaries thought, in the language being "too high" as in its not being sufficiently clear and suitable for the stage. It was quite a long time before Madhu Sūdan fully discovered what "height" or elegance of style really meant. But the critics of to-day and of the future must give Madhu Sūdan the credit, not for his attempts at making the language "too high," but for "doing so much all at once" and doing it so surprisingly well.

The first performance of *Śarmiṣṭhā* took place at the "Belgāchhiā Theatre" on the 3rd September, 1859.[2] The audience was quite as distinguished as at the performances of *Ratnāvalī*. The English translation of the play was also distributed to the European visitors. The auditorium was tastefully decorated and the stage was furnished with appropriate scenery. The music was excellent. A letter[3] which Rājā Īśvar

[1] *Michael Madhu Sūdan Datter Jīban-Charit*, Letter No. 16, p. 247.

[2] In 1867, *Śarmiṣṭhā* was performed for the second time at Cooch Behar in the Rājā's palace, under the auspices of Col. J. C. Houghton, the Commissioner of the Rajshahi Division.

[3] See Y. N. Basu, *Michael Madhu Sūdan Datter Jīban-Charit*, pp. 233–5, footnote.

Chandra wrote on the 24th March, 1859, to Gour Dās Basāk furnishes us with the cast of the first performance and with many other interesting facts concerning the performance itself. The audience on the first night gave a very cordial reception to the play. Madhu Sūdan himself was beside himself with joy. He wrote to Rāj Nārāyaṇ Basu to this effect: "When *Śarmiṣṭhā* was acted at Belgāchhiā, the impression it created was indescribable. Even the least romantic spectator was charmed by the character of Śarmiṣṭhā and shed tears with her. As for my feelings, they were 'things to dream not to tell'. Poor old Rām Chandra Mitter was mad and grasped my hand, saying, 'Why, my dear Madhu, my dear Madhu, this does you great credit, indeed! O, it is beautiful.'" [1]

The success of *Śarmiṣṭhā* encouraged Madhu Sūdan to write more plays. He wrote to Gour Dās again: "Now that I have got the taste of blood, I am at it again. I am now writing another play. Some time ago, I sent a synopsis of the plot to the Rājās, and they appear to be quite taken with it. The first act is finished. Tagore has written to me to say that it is 'indeed very good'. If I can achieve myself a name by writing Bengali I ought to do it." [2] This play was *Padmāvatī*, Madhu Sūdan's second Bengali drama. In the handling of its subject matter Madhu Sūdan showed a decided improvement on his first work. It has a strong plot that twists itself up into a knot and then disentangles itself. He shows greater economy of means and attempts to create the dramatic effect, not by circumlocution but by simplification. The language of this play is much less artificial and much more appropriate to the evolution of the essentials of his story. In this play he used both prose and verse, all the poetry being in blank verse.[3] In fact, this was his first experiment with blank verse. He had a firm conviction that the Bengali drama could not thrive unless blank verse was freely used. He wrote to Rāj Nārāyaṇ Basu, after he had finished

[1] See Y. N. Basu, *Michael Madhu Sūdan Datter Jīban-Charit*, Letter No. 19 (dated 1st July, 1860), p. 321.

[2] *Ibid.*, Letter No. 16 (dated 19th March, 1859), p. 247.

[3] It ought to be mentioned here that Madhu Sūdan was the first Bengali poet to use blank verse. The best and most perfect specimens of the use of blank verse in the Bengali language are to be found in his famous Epics and Kāvyas.

Padmāvatī: "Some days ago I wrote to my publisher to send you a copy of the new drama; I am very anxious to hear what you think about it. I am of opinion that our drama should be in blank verse and not in prose, but the innovation must be brought about by degrees. If I should live to write other dramas, you may rest assured, I shall not allow myself to be bound down by the dicta of Mr. Viswanath of the Sāhitya-Darpaṇ.[1] I shall look to the great dramatists of Europe for models. That would be founding a real National theatre . . . But let me know what you think of *Padmāvatī*. I am sure I need not tell you that in the first act you have the Greek story of the golden apple Indianized."[2] Here Madhu Sūdan tells us himself that he borrowed the story of *Padmāvatī* from a Greek legend. The Greek story is too well-known to be repeated here in detail. It relates to the quarrel over a golden apple between the three rival Greek goddesses, Juno, Pallas and Venus, who went to Paris and asked him to give the golden apple to the one among them who was the most beautiful. In Madhu Sūdan's story, Śachī Devī, the Queen of Indra; Rati Devī, the wife of Madan, the god of love; and Murajā Devī, the Queen of Kuber (the King of the Yakṣas), unable to decide between themselves who, being the most beautiful, deserved the golden lotus given to them by the meddlesome demi-god Nārada, besought King Indranīl of Bidarbha to judge between them. Apart from these similarities between the leading personages of the two stories, there is no further sign in Madhu Sūdan's play of indebtedness to the Greek legend. He gave to his play a distinctly Hindu flavour, and as Paṇḍit Rāmgati Nyāyaratna rightly observed,[3] he was more strongly influenced by Kālidāsa's *Śakuntalā* than by the Greek story. King Indranīl decides the beauty-contest in favour of Rati Devī, who, according to her promise, gives him for his bride Padmāvatī, the beautiful princess of Māhiṣmatī Purī. The two disappointed goddesses, Śachī Devī and Murajā Devī, then avenge themselves on

[1] Mr. Viswanath belonged to the orthodox school of Bengali critics, who laid down rules for Bengali drama in strict accordance with the classical doctrines.

[2] *Michael Madhu Sūdan Datter Jīban-Charit*, Letter No. 18 (dated 15th May, 1860), p. 317.

[3] See *Bāṅglā Bhāsā O Sāhitya Biṣayak Prastāb* (A Discourse on the Bengali Language and Literature), p. 260.

King Indranīl by subjecting him to continuous sufferings and difficulties and finally taking away Padmavatī from him. Śachī Devī is the more aggressive of the two and she takes the wicked god Kali as her accomplice. Rati Devī, however, comes at every instant to the rescue of the King, and in the end, reunites him with his lost queen Padmāvatī, whom she in the meantime had cleverly removed to the hermitage of the sage Aṅgirā and put under the protection of Bhagavatī Devī, to save her from the wrath of her rivals. Finally, Bhagavatī Devī brings about a reconciliation between the three goddesses, who all bless the re-union of the King and Padmāvatī. Following the Greek convention, Madhu Sūdan made his human beings in the play complete puppets in the hands of the spiteful goddesses. But Madhu Sūdan's Śachī Devī is a much less quarrelsome and vain goddess than the Juno of the Greek story. Madhu Sūdan showed great skill in bringing out fully the character of Padmāvatī, and he made her of the well-known type of a Hindu woman, patient in suffering and loyal to her husband even in the midst of most trying circumstances. Mahārājā Yatīndra Mohan Tagore wrote very appreciatively of this play in a letter (dated 22nd May, 1860) to Madhu Sūdan: "I quite forgot to mention in my last letter that I have read your *Padmāvatī* with the greatest pleasure; and how could it be otherwise when the book owes its authorship to you? The style is neat and colloquial (perhaps in places a little too much so) and many of the sentiments are rich and fanciful. The story, being quite of a novel sort in the Bengali language, is highly entertaining and the interest in it is well preserved to the very last; in short, the play is well worthy of the author of *Śarmiṣṭhā*, but you must excuse me, my dear sir, if I still betray a greater leaning towards our favourite 'Daitya Rāj Bālā'[1] It may be that a longer and more intimate acquaintance with her has made me partial to her merits; but this is simply a matter of opinion, and I hope you will not take my remarks amiss."[2] *Padmāvatī* was never produced at the "Belgāchhiā Theatre." Its first performance took place in 1866 at Śimuliā. In the following year, on the 14th September, it was performed for

[1] The reference is to Śarmiṣṭhā (the daughter of the King of the Demons).
[2] See *Michael Madhu Sūdan Datter Jīban-Charit*, p. 264.

a second time at the private residence of one Pāṁch Kouṛi Mitra. Bihāri Lāl Chakrabartī personally conducted the rehearsals for this performance and Nitāi Chakrabartī and Jayala Prasād organized the concert-party.

Kṛṣṇakumārī is Madhu Sūdan's last serious drama, written towards the end of 1866. It is an historical play and was most probably inspired by Raṅga Lāl Bannerji's *Padminī Upākhyān* (The story of Padmiṇī). It deals with the wars between Jay Siṁha, the King of Jaipur, and Mān Siṁha, the King of Maru Deś, both intent on marrying Kṛṣṇakumārī, the beautiful princess of Udaypur. Kṛṣṇakumārī's father Bhīm Siṁha plans to kill his daughter himself in order to put an end to the conflict, which he could not otherwise quell. Kṛṣṇakumārī, apprised of her father's intention, kills herself. It is the only tragedy that Madhu Sūdan ever wrote, and showed again his independence of the canons of the Sanskrit drama. The character of the princess Kṛṣṇā in this play is one of the finest portraits of women ever drawn by the hand of Madhu Sūdan. The character of the wily and greedy scoundrel, Dharmadās is also presented with admirable skill. The dialogue is handled throughout with a sense of dramatic proportion and the narrative-manner is as far as possible carefully avoided. The first performance of *Kṛṣṇakumārī* took place on the 12th February, 1867, at the residence of the Rājās of Sobhabazar.[2] Bihārī Lāl Chakrabartī appeared in the rôle of Bhīm Siṁha.

(*b*) *His Comedies*

Between the writing of *Śarmiṣṭhā* and *Padmāvatī*, Madhu Sūdan wrote his two well-known comedies, *Ekei Ki Bale Sabhyatā!* (So This Is Civilization !) and *Buṛo Śāliker Ghāṛe Roṁ* (New Feathers on an Old Bird's Neck). These may be regarded as the first genuine comedies in the Bengali language. Ṭek Chāṁd Ṭhākur's *Ālāler Gharer Dulāl* (The Darling of the House of Alāl) is admittedly an earlier work, and has frequently been mentioned as the first Bengali comedy but, speaking strictly, it is nothing

[1] See *Michael Madhu Sūdan Datter Jīban-Charit*, p. 264.

[2] Girīś Chandra Ghoṣ, the founder of the " National Theatre " and the most distinguished Bengali playwright and actor was present at this performance. He was then only twenty-three years of age. For further details see Chaps. XVIII and XIX, pp. 95–106.

but a comic treatise, written in very clever and humorous colloquial prose. Nor can *Kulīn-Kul-Sarbasva* be regarded as the first Bengali comedy, although it contains many farcical episodes and comic interludes. Madhu Sūdan wrote these comedies at the suggestion of the Rājās, who wanted them for the "Belgāchhiā Theatre." But, for reasons still unknown, they were never performed on that stage. In both plays, Madhu Sūdan satirizes the moral and social conditions prevalent in Bengal during his time. He sets forth the follies of his own generation for our laughter. He does not limit himself by a thesis like Rām Nārāyaṇ nor does he criticize merely from the outside. He saw the hypocrisies of the moribund Hindu society trying to save itself by clinging to the past, and also as well the extravagances and excesses in which some people were indulging in the name of "modern" ideas. As the first result of unassimilated English education, a certain class of Bengali young men began to despise everything Indian. They ridiculed the old generation of Paṇḍits as ignorant and narrow, spoke contemptuously of the Hindu Śāstras, decried the ancient religion as superstition, scoffed at those who did not see eye to eye with them, and tried to imitate blindly Western habits and ways of life. The result was that they adopted things without understanding them and carried to ridiculous extremes whatever was particularly bad in Western habits and ways of thinking. A graphic description of this state of affairs among this class of Bengali youth is given by the Rev. Pratāp Chandra Mazumdar in an introductory chapter to his "*Life and Teachings of Keśab Chandra Sen.*" The Earl of Ronaldshay describes the period as one "of intellectual anarchy . . . which swept the rising generation before it like a craft which has snapped its moorings," and further remarks that "Westernism became the fashion of the day and Westernism demanded of its votaries that they should cry down the civilization of their own country. The more ardent their admiration for everything Western the more vehement their denunciation of everything Eastern . . . The ancient foundations upon which the complex structure of Hindu society had been built were undermined and the new generation of iconoclasts found little enough with which to underpin the edifice which they were so recklessly depriving of its own foundations

. . . The new wine of Western learning was poured with disastrous results into the old bottles of Hinduism ; and there is no doubt that it went to the heads of young Bengal." [1] Now these excesses and idiosyncrasies of " young Bengal " seemed to Madhu Sūdan an appropriate subject for satire and caricature. Madhu Sūdan himself was one of the leading enthusiasts among young social reformers of his day ; so, nobody knew better than he the defects and absurdities of a blind imitation of everything European. Consequently the picture of society which he tried to give in *Ekei Ki Bale Sabhyatā !* is absolutely true to life. The description of a typical young Calcutta " Bābu " of those days ordering his aged father to bring him a glass of wine or addressing his wife as a courtesan, is not in the least exaggerated ; it only reveals some of the extreme tendencies which marked the action and behaviour of " Young Bengal." This young " Bābu," called Naba Kumār in the story, is the son of a wealthy father, a devout Vaiṣṇava, but without any English education. The father spends his time in reading religious books and saying his prayers, and his so-called educated son Naba Kumār passes his days in the company of his friends in literary and social discussions. Naba Kumār and his friends have established a club called " Jñana-Taraṅginī Sabhā " (A Society for the Promotion of Learning). They meet regularly every Saturday evening. They drink wine and eat ices and talk about the pressing problems of the day, such as female emancipation, widow remarriage, etc. The speeches are made in a half-English and half Bengali style, and these are constantly punctuated with cheers and slogans like " Be Free," " Let us enjoy ourselves," " Jñana-Taraṅginī for Ever " and generally end in " Hip Hip Hurrah." Then they eat their dinner, served in English style, and make merry till late in the night with music and dancing performed by dancing-girls. Naba Kumār's father grows suspicious, and one evening sends a Vaiṣṇava friend of his to the club to find out how his son is spending his time. The friend is scoffed at and insulted by Naba Kumār and his associates, and comes back and reports the whole affair to the father. The poor distracted father, no longer able to endure this state of affairs, leaves Calcutta, " the sinful city," as he calls it, and goes

[1] *The Heart of Āryāvarta*, pp. 44–5.

away to Vṛndāban with his wife and children. So this is civilization !

Ekei Ki Bale Sabhyatā ! is full of realism of the most daring kind. In attempting a diagnosis of the disease from which society was suffering, Madhu Sūdan probes not merely skin-deep, but right down to the roots of a situation at once comic and tragic. Though the play lacks the brilliance of pure humour, it is not in the least artificial. We are constantly entertained by Madhu Sūdan's pleasantries. We admire his delicate skill and we laugh at his inconsequences. And the ripple of laughter never disturbs the depths of the serious feeling evoked by the play. It does not, however, invigorate us like a Shavian comedy nor does it shake us into full-blooded laughter like Falstaff. But it is gay with intelligent wit and it always remains deliciously futile.

The other side of the picture—Hindu orthodoxy with its arrant stupidities, sham hypocrisies and hide-bound conventions —he satirizes in *Buṛo Śāliker Ghāṛe Roṁ*. He exposes the immoral practices of that class of Hindus who profess to be religious but transgress their religion every minute of their lives. He makes Bhakta Prasād, the hero of the story, typical of this class. The most complete picture of Madhu Sūdan's hero is to be found in the four lines of verse with which he concludes his play. We are told how this Bhakta Prasād outwardly professing to be a saintly character, secretly indulges in all sorts of grossly immoral liaisons with the help of hired accomplices. He gets into trouble, however, in trying to seduce the wife of a courageous Muhammadan *rāyat* of his, named Hāniph who, discovering his evil intentions, beats him almost to death. This teaches Bhakta Prasād the lesson of his life, and he eventually wishes to compensate for all the wrong and injustice he has hitherto done to his *rāyats*. He gives back the land he had unlawfully confiscated from a poor Brāhmaṇ and presents Hāniph with two hundred rupees. Mr. Yogīndra Nāth Basu points out that certain incidents in the play are founded on fact and that the character of Bhakta Prasād is conceived after a very close relative of Madhu Sūdan's own.[1] Paṇḍit Rāmgati Nyayaratna takes serious objection to the play

[1] See *Michael Madhu Sūdan Datter Jīban-Charit*, p. 307.

on the ground that the character of Bhakta Prasād is extremely unnatural and that the subject-matter itself is "improper" and "filthy."[1] How many Bhakta Prasāds, asks the Paṇḍit, are to be found in real life? It is quite obvious why the learned Paṇḍit disapproved of the subject-matter. The comedy dealt mercilessly with the heinous practices of the orthodox Bengali community to which the Paṇḍit himself belonged. Similarly, it is easy to see why the Paṇḍit should have described the other comedy, *Ekei Ki Bale Sabhyatā!* as "a masterpiece."[2] Because it pleased him very much to see the young reformers so mercilessly exposed and brought to book. It is, however, not fair to allow personal prejudice to influence criticism. Criticism, if it is anything at all, is a fair appraisal of the defects and qualities of a particular work of art, and its duty is to grant to the artist whatever material he chooses and to concern itself only with the use he makes of it.

These two comedies of Madhu Sūdan are a really valuable contribution to Bengali literature. They give us an accurate account of the social and moral conditions of Bengal in the late 'seventies and 'eighties. The character-sketches are unquestionably faithful to the facts. Indeed, Naba Kumārs and Bhakta Prasāds could be found in plenty at that transitional period of Bengali history. The life presented in these plays is very real and true, although it is presented with a brutal frankness. Madhu Sūdan's sense of detachment and impartiality and his freedom from prejudice are most admirable. He wanted to be fair to both sides, orthodox and modern, and he was not blind to the defects and merits of either. He did not wish to preach and pose like Rām Nārāyaṇ as a moralist or as the champion of a cause. He depicted life as it is, not as it ought to be. Perhaps it is due to this fact more than to anything else that Madhu Sūdan's comedies, though written in a somewhat lighthearted and flippant style, are superior to all other Bengali comedies, whether old or new. Paṇḍit Hara Prasād Śāstrī, one of the most thoughtful and able critics of the present day, assigns

[1] *Bāṅglā Bhāṣā O Sāhitya Biṣayak Prastāb* (A Discourse on Bengali Language and Literature), p. 262.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 259.

Madhu Sūdan's comedies a foremost place in Bengali literature.[1] The occasional vulgarity of tone and language is, however, to be sincerely regretted To reveal unpleasant truths was a task as bold as it was delicate, and in certain places Madhu Sūdan's sense of humour missed its mark by exaggeration ; but he only wanted his disagreeable revelations to be received with the contempt they deserved. Perhaps the laughter which he provoked was not always as wholesome nor was the contempt he aroused as refined and dignified as we could have wished. Even Madhu Sūdan himself was hardly quite satisfied with the result ; for, he says in a letter to Rāj Nārāyaṇ Basu : "As a scribbler, I am of course proud to think that you like my farces ; but to tell you the candid truth, I half regret having published those two things. You know that as yet we have not established a National Theatre ; I mean, we have not as yet got a body of sound, classical dramas to regulate the national taste, and therefore, we ought not to have farces . . . If I am spared I want to write three or four more plays of the classical kind, just to give our countrymen a taste for that species of the drama, and then take up historical and other subjects."[2] Madhu Sūdan was too responsible a dramatist to overlook the limitations of farce-writing. To regulate and train the national taste, first by classical dramas, and then put it to the test by comedies, was undoubtedly a very sound idea ; but Madhu Sūdan was not able to realize his ambition in this respect. *Ekei Ki Bale Sabhyatā* was first performed in 1864 for three nights in the private house of Rājā Devī Kṛṣṇa Deb of Sobhābazar, under the auspices of the "Sobhābazar Private Theatrical Company," organized mainly at the instance of the Rājās of Sobhābazar. A detailed account of the play appeared in an issue of the "Hindu Parriot."[3] *Buṛo Śāliker Ghāṛe Roṁ* was performed once or twice in May, 1866, but the actual place and circumstances are not known.

[1] See Y. N. Basu, *Michael Madhu Sūdan Datter Jīban-Charit*, p. 303, footnote.

[2] *Ibid.*, Letter No. 17 (dated the 24th April, 1860), p. 310–11.

[3] See Śyāmā Prasād Mukherji's *The Bengali Theatre*, p. 118, footnote.

CHAPTER XVII

The Rivals of the Belgāchhiā Theatre

The experiment of the "Belgāchhiā Theatre" was soon imitated in many other places in Bengal. Chorbāgān and Bowbazar, Joṛāsāṁko and Bāgbazar, Pāthuriāghāṭā and Baṛabazar were the best known centres of dramatic activity in the city of Calcutta. But the movement also extended as far as Burdwan, Bhāṭpāṛā, Chinsurāh, Śibpur, Chandernagore and other places. All the rivals of the "Belgāchhiā Theatre" tried to eclipse its established reputation. In the house of Gopāl Lāl Mallik at Siṁduriāpaṭṭi, Baṛabazar, a private theatrical company was started in 1860, and under its auspices and the direct supervision of Keśab Chandra Sen, the well-known social and religious reformer, a play called *Bidhabā Bibāha* (Widow Re-marriage) was produced. This was an unmistakable indication of the trend of opinion amongst the educated Hindu community in regard to a very important social problem which has not even yet been completely solved. The scenery for this play is said to have been painted and designed by an English artist.[1] The "orchestra" was composed of several Bengali musical experts. A Bengali journal of that time, called *Biśvakoṣ*, tells us that the cost of production amounted to nearly four thousand rupees and the performance was in no way inferior to those given at the "Belgāchhiā Theatre."[2] Another newspaper, *The Bengali Hurkara*, contained notices and criticism of the play, from which we gather that the cast included such prominent men as Kṛṣṇa Bihārī Sen (brother of Keśab Chandra Sen), Pratāp Chandra Mazumdār, Bholā Nāth Chakrabartī and Narendra Nāth Sen, the editor of the *Indian Mirror*.[3] In 1864, Gopāl Chandra Chakrabartī and his private theatre

[1] "The Bengali Theatre," *The Calcutta Review*, January, 1925, p. 18.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 18, footnote.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 117, footnote.

company of Bāgbazar gave a successful performance of *Nala-Damayantī*, written by Kālidās Sānyāl. This same company gave in 1866 seven successive performances of another play, called *Indu-Prabhā*, written by Girīś Chandra Bannerji. In March, 1866, a performance of Umeś Chandra Mitra's *Sītār Banabās*, a dramatized version of the well-known story of the exile of Sītā, took place in the house of Nīl Maṇi Mitra. During the months of April and May of the same year dozens of plays were produced in different parts of Calcutta. Among these may be specially mentioned Nimāi Chandra Śil's *Chandrābalī* and a farce called *Erāi Ābār Baṛa Lok!* (So These are our Grandees !).

Towards the beginning of 1860, the "Belgāchhiā Theatre" gradually retired into the background. Madhu Sūdan once wrote to Mahārājā Yatīndra Mohan Tagore, expressing a desire to write a drama in blank verse and asking if the "Belgāchhiā Theatre" would stage it. This was the reply he received : "I should very much like to see blank verse gradually introduced in our dramatic literature. I am inclined to believe that at first it should be done with great caution and judgment . . . I am sorry to say, however, that I cannot hold out much hope as to your seeing soon such plays acted on the stage ; for I am led to believe that the Rājās will have no more Bengali plays at the "Belgāchhiā Theatre."[1] Mahārājā Yatīndra Mohan himself, however, was not deterred by the waning interest of the Pāikpāṛā Rājās from further efforts to popularize the drama in Bengal. With the help of his elder brother, Sourīndra Mohan, he had a permanent stage erected in the family mansion at Pāthuriāghāṭā. He translated Kālidāsa's *Mālavikāgnimitra* and had it staged in 1865. This performance was followed by a number of plays produced regularly at the "Pāthuriāghāṭā Theatre," most of which the Mahārājā wrote himself. Kiśorī Chāṁd Mitra, a contemporary critic, described the "Pāthuriāghāṭā Theatre" as "not very spacious but very beautifully got-up . . . The scenes are singularly well-painted, especially the drop-scene,

[1] See Y. N. Basu's *Life of Michael Madhu Sūdan Datta*, Letter of Y. M. Tagore (undated), pp. 263–4.

which is ablaze with aloes and water lilies and entirely Oriental." [1] Admittance to the "Pāthuriāghāṭā Theatre" was strictly by tickets which were, however, distributed free to a selected audience. Those who failed to secure tickets had to come back disappointed and often even insulted by the door-keepers. In 1865, Mahārājā Yatīndra Mohan revived *Vidyā-Sundar* at this theatre. He made many additions and alterations in the play, cutting out some of the indecent passages and episodes. Kisorī Chāṁd Mitra, speaking of this reformed *Vidyā-Sundar* as contrasted with the original, observes: "The drama is full of striking and interesting incidents; but as originally composed by Bhārat Chandra, it was characterized neither by chasteness of diction nor by purity of thought, although it exhibited a richness of fancy and fertility of imagination unsurpassed in any other Bengali writer." [2] The same evening was produced the Mahārājā's comedy *Yeman Karma Temni Phal* (As You Sow So You Reap). In December, 1866, another comedy written also by the Mahārājā, called *Bujhle Kinā* (You Understand—Don't You ?) was produced. On the 2nd November, 1867, a farce called *Kichhu Kichhu Bujhi* (Yes, I Have Some Idea), written by Bholā Nāth Mukherji was performed at the Joṛasāṁko residence of Harendra Nāth Mukherji as a sort of counter-blast to the Mahārājā's *Bujhle Ki Nā*. This performance of *Kichhu Kichhu Bujhi* is quite significant in the dramatic history of Bengal. It was the occasion of the first appearance of a brilliant actor named Arddhendu Śekhar Mustaphī and a great stage-architect, Dhamra Dās Sūr. Arddhendu Śekhar conducted the rehearsals and Dharma Dās was responsible for the construction of the stage and its appurtenances. Arddhendu appeared in three different rôles, "Dantabakra," "Murād Āli" and "Chandanbilās." He achieved his greatest success as "Dantabakra." This particular rôle gave him ample scope for exhibiting his wonderful capacity for mimicry. Madhu Sūdan was present at this performance and was so impressed by Arddhendu's acting that he is reported to have exclaimed, "Mṛttikere Bābā Mṛttike !," meaning that

[1] See "The Modern Hindu Drama," *The Calcutta Review*, 1873, vol. lvii, p. 259.
[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 261–2.

the Mahārājā's play to which the present one was a reply was as "earth, earthy" in comparison. Arddhendu was a cousin of the Tagores, who thought it extremely insulting that he should take part in a rival play and successfully represent a character intended to caricature the toothache of Mahārājā Yatīndra Mohan's elder brother, Sourīndra Mohan. The Tagores never forgave Arddhendu, and ultimately he had to leave their protection and patronage. The "Pāthuriāghāṭā Theatre," however, continued to produce more plays, undaunted by hostile criticism. In 1869, Bhavabhūti's *Mālatī Mādhava*, translated into Bengali by Paṇḍit Rām Nārāyaṇ Tarkaratna, was staged, and on the 10th February, 1872, *Rukminī Haraṇ*. This latter was followed by the Mahārājā's own comedy, *Ubhay Saṁkaṭ* (The Dilemma). All the performances on the Pāthuriāghātā stage were accompanied by a good "orchestra" composed of a number of well-known Bengali musical experts.

Amongst the countless private theatre companies which were active in Calcutta in and after 1867, the "Bahubazar Abaitanik Nāṭya Samāj" (The Amateur Dramatic Society of Bowbazar) was certainly the best and most popular. Its establishment and later success were entirely due to the enterprising Basu family of No. 25, Biśva Nāth Mallik Lane, Bowbazar. The well-known Dhar family, the neighbours of the Basus, were also for some time associated with it. Its principal organizer and director was Pratāp Chandra Bannerji. Under his able guidance, assisted by the enlightened liberality of the Basus, the "Bowbazar Theatre" came to be the best equipped amateur theatre in Calcutta. It lived for fully six years. The cost of the production of plays and the expenses of the maintenance of a permanent stage were borne by the members of the Basu family. Performances were held every Saturday evening, and most of the plays produced there were written by Mano Mohan Basu, the most gifted of the Basus.

Mano Mohan Basu showed literary and musical gifts even at a very early age. He was one of the best students of his time in the Hare School and later in the General Assembly's Institution. The two well-known English educationists of that time, David Hare and Captain Richardson, exercised a very great

influence on him. But the greatest of all the impulses he received in his earlier days towards the development of his poetic and literary gifts came from his uncle, Chandra Śekhar Basu. Mano Mohan lost his father at a very early age and was placed under the guardianship of his uncle, who took a keen and sympathetic interest in him and encouraged him to take up a literary career. Mano Mohan gradually came to be intimately associated with most of the well-known Bengali writers, such as the poet Īśvar Chandra Gupta, the author and critic Akṣay Kumār Datta, Maharṣi Debendra Nāth Tagore (father of Rabīndra Nāth Tagore) and Kālī Prasanna Siṁha. First he took to journalism and began to contribute regularly to "Prabhākar" and "Tattvabodhinī Pātrikā." Within a short time he started a weekly Bengali paper of his own, called *Bibhākar*. Then with the help of a number of young friends he organized an amateur Yātrā company in his native village for the production of clean and wholesome Bengali plays. Mano Mohan wrote his first play, *Rāmābhiṣek* (Rāma's Coronation) for this company. It was quite a good play and bore the mark of originality. It was entirely free from the indecencies of the current Yātrās, and several well-known Bengali journals, among which may be mentioned *Prabhākar*, *The Education Gazette* and *Dacca Prakāś* of the year 1867 were unanimous in praise of its merits.[1] The play dealt with the ideals of loyalty, fidelity and filial affection as in the original story of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and the evils of polygamy were incidentally pointed out. Rāma Chandra's character as an ideal hero, brother and husband was very well brought out. Several neighbouring villages also took up the play and special performances were given to raise money for famine relief. Later it was presented at the "Bowbazar Theatre" in Calcutta. This was, of course, by far the best performance of the play so far given, as the "Bowbazar Theatre" was fully equipped with appropriate scenery and costumes, good actors and musical accompaniment which the village companies lacked. Within a short time, the first printed edition of *Rāmābhiṣek* was sold out and the publishers charged unreason-

[1] See Amarendra Nāth Datta, *Abhinetṛ-Kāhinī*, p. 60.

able prices for the few copies that were still left. Mano Mohan wrote his second drama, *Praṇay Parikṣā* (The Ordeal of Love), whilst on a visit to Dacca. We reproduce here Kṛṣṇa Dās Pal's comments on this play which appeared in the *Hindu Patriot* of the 12th December, 1870: "The long-felt need of plays readable by Bengali women has been met. *Praṇay Parikṣā* is decidedly better than its predecessor; because its theme is original, conceived by the author's own imagination. We cannot help feeling amazed at the way in which the author has succeeded in making his work both instructive and entertaining at the same time . . . and without borrowing his story from anybody else." [1] Two more dramas followed: *Sati Nāṭak*, written in 1872 and *Hariś Chandra*, in 1874 and both of these were produced at the "Bowbazar Theatre." The demand for seats at these performances was so great that the directors had to turn away hundreds of people. The female rôles at the "Bowbazar Theatre" used to be taken by men, but their voice, make-up and dress were not in the least unnatural or inappropriate. *Hariś Chandra* may be regarded as Mano Mohan's best work. In it he created the powerfully dramatic character of Viśvāmitra, the famous Kṣatriya hero of Hindu legendary history. He made him a typical representative of the ancient Kṣatriya culture, noble, aggressive and great. He also revealed in Hariś Chandra the noblest ideals of a Hindu King who strove to gain spiritual power through sacrifice and renunciation. The character of the much suffering Queen Śaibyā is drawn with consummate skill. She is utterly tragic in her tenderness, and yet so austerely heroic in the endurance of the sufferings that came upon her and her husband Hariś Chandra, who lost his kingdom and all rather than break his plighted word to Viśvāmitra. All the characters in the play move, act and feel with intense vitality and the drama as a whole is of absorbing interest from beginning to end. The harmonious adjustment of the conflicting forces, implicit in the story itself, is a masterly dramatic feat. Nowhere is the artistic unity or balance destroyed, and the play moves naturally to its dramatic end. Mano Mohan's command of the

[1] See *Abhinetṛ-Kāhinī*, p. 60.

Bengali language and his understanding of the resources of the stage are still more fully revealed in *Satī Nāṭak*, a tragedy of the heroic death of Satī, caused by the deliberate and malicious defamation of her husband Śiva by her father Dakṣa. It was something of an achievement that he could hold the stage uninterruptedly to the end with a story that was so familiar. Mano Mohan may be regarded as the first Bengali dramatist to show how the Paurāṇic stories could be effectively utilized for play-writing and what a rich mine lay waiting for the dramatist in the old folk-lore and mythology. Between 1885 and 1886, his *Pārtha-Parājay* (The Defeat of *Pārtha*) and *Ānandamay* (The Blissful) appeared. In 1889, he wrote a short musical drama called *Rās-Līlā*. This was his last work.

THE AGE OF GIRĪŚ CHANDRA GHOṢ

CHAPTER XVIII

The Early Activities of Girīś Chandra Ghoṣ

So we have noticed that during the years succeeding 1857, a considerable number of important Bengali plays had been produced. The public enthusiasm for dramatic performances had steadily increased year after year. But so far most of the work for the development of the drama in Bengal had been done only under the patronage of a few wealthy Bengali aristocrats. A permanent national stage had not yet been established, and the theatres under private enterprise, numerous though they were, were insufficient to accommodate all who were anxious to witness plays. The Tagores exercised great discrimination in the distribution of tickets, and, as a rule, selected their guests mostly from the wealthy Bengalis. Their rules for admittance were so strict that it was almost impossible for any large number from the general public to see their performances. Such favouritism and exclusiveness soon became unbearable. The conservatism of the well-to-do patrons of the Bengali drama could no longer remain unchallenged by their countrymen. A revolt was brewing, and a very strong and healthy spirit of competition became manifest. The very idea of beating the Tagores by producing plays in a much better and improved way, and thereby breaking away from the patronage of the wealthy people, was sufficient to inspire a new movement whose far-reaching effects even the strongest of optimists could not have foreseen.

Fortunately for the Bengali drama, the leader of this movement was Girīś Chandra Ghoṣ, a very brilliant young man who was gifted with inventive genius as well as ability. He had both courage and foresight. Many times had he gone to see plays at the theatre of the Tagores and come back disgusted at the snobbishness and conservative spirit of the audience and the

organizers. He thoroughly disliked the barriers of wealth and position and one grand idea that kept recurring to his mind was the desirability of establishing a national theatre, a play-house for everybody, which all his countrymen irrespective of rank and wealth would be able to attend. But he had not the financial resources to carry out his idea immediately; so he decided to start in a rather modest way with a small Yātrā company. He found two energetic supporters of his unpretentious scheme in Nagendra Nāth Bannerji and Dharma Dās Śūr, the artist and painter of whom mention has already been made.[1] The Yātrā company was started in 1867 at Bāgbazar and Madhu Sūdan's *Śarmiṣṭhā* was selected for the opening performance. But a difficulty arose; *Śarmiṣṭhā* contained no songs suitable for a Yātrā performance. Priya Nāth Mallik, a well-known musical composer, was approached to write the necessary music, but he flatly refused, remarking that the young enthusiasts could never succeed. Extremely indignant at this refusal, Girīś Chandra in his youthful enthusiasm, said to one of his friends, Umeś Chandra Chaudhurī, "Why bother? Come along, we two will compose the songs as best we can."[2] And so they did. As a matter of fact, Girīś Chandra was not altogether a novice at such a task. As a student he had made a special study of the eighteenth century English poetry and had independently made some Bengali translations from Pope and John Gay. He had also tried his hand at writing original verses in Bengali and English which he used to read aloud to his class-mates and then tear them up. Amṛta Lāl Basu, a well-known Bengali comedian, has remarked that some of these youthful poems and songs of Girīś Chandra would have made anybody's reputation as a poet, if they had only been preserved.[3] So to the task of composing songs for *Śarmiṣṭhā* Girīś Chandra brought not only a youthful enthusiasm, awakened by a healthy spirit of rivalry, but also an experience of considerable value. Songs composed and preparations complete, *Śarmiṣṭhā* was produced during the latter part of 1867, and its success was beyond all expectation. It did not, however, fully satisfy Girīś Chandra, who could not for a single moment banish from

[1] See Chap. XVII, p. 90. [2] See *Abhinetṛ-Kāhinī*, p. 12.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 6.

his mind his one great idea of establishing a national theatre, where plays could be produced regularly on a permanent stage.

During the early part of the year 1869, an excellent opportunity presented itself when Dīna Bandhu Mitra's epoch-making work, *Sadhabār Ekādaśī*[1] was published. It soon became so popular that Girīś Chandra felt that if he could only put it on the stage before the tide of popular enthusiasm began to ebb, his long-cherished hope might be realized. Without delay he began to make arrangements for its production on a scale which his funds would barely allow. As the play dealt with contemporary social life and manners, it was not necessary to spend money on elaborate scenery or expensive costumes. This meant a great saving in the cost of production. A temporary stage was erected at the residence of Prāṇ Kṛṣṇa Hāldār at Bāgbazar in the simplest and most unpretentious style. The scenery and settings for the stage were designed and painted by Dharma Dās Śūr. Again it was considered necessary to introduce some songs into the play and these Girīś Chandra himself composed. He also wrote a short prologue to introduce the play, according to the usual fashion of those days. The songs and the prologue added greatly to the suitability of the play for representation on the stage. The performance took place on the first evening of the Durga Pujā in October, 1869. It was, indeed, a red-letter day in the history of the Bengali theatre. It was the first attempt to provide a dramatic performance open to everybody irrespective of rank and position. The cast included, besides Girīś Chandra himself, Arddhendu Śekhar Mustaphī, Rādhā Mādhab Kar, Amṛta Lāl Mukherji and Nagendra Nāth Bannerji. The play was performed on seven occasions in different parts of Calcutta between 1869 and 1870. The author Dīna Bandhu Mitra with his numerous friends and admirers was present at the third performance in the house of Dewan Rām Prasād Mitra at Shāmbazar. Biju Bāhādur, the Rājā of Sobhābazar, Durgā Dās Kar, a famous Calcutta physician and Gopāl Lāl Mitra, then the vice-chairman of the Calcutta Municipality,

[1] "Ekādaśī" means the eleventh day of the moon, which Hindu widows usually observe as a fast day and "Sadhabā" means a woman whose husband is living; so *Sadhabār Ekādaśī* may be translated: "The observance of Ekādaśī by a woman whose husband is still alive."

were also present. A light comedy *Biye Pāglā Buṛo* (An Old Man Crazy to Marry), also written by Dīna Bandhu Mitra, was included in its seventh and last performance, which was held at the residence of Lakṣmī Nārāyaṇ Datta at Chorbāgān. In this comedy the author tells us humorously of the ridicule poured upon an old man who makes a fool of himself by his desire for marriage at an age when he was only fit to die. Girīś Chandra wrote an epilogue to *Sadhabār Ekādaśī* by way of introducing the new comedy and recited it himself at the close of the first play. In the comedy, Arddhendu Śekhar appeared in the rôle of "Rājīb" and Dharma Dās in that of "Rātā," a female character.

Commenting on the fourth performance of *Sadhabār Ekādaśī*, the late Justice Sāradā Charaṇ Miṭra wrote in *Baṅga Darśan*: "In February, 1870, on the occasion of the Sarsvatī Pujā, I saw for the first time the performance of *Sadhabār Ekādaśī* in the house of Rai Bahadur Rām Prasād Mitra at Shambazar. My M.A. examination was over that day; so wishing to enjoy the evening and not to go to bed at all, I went to the house of Rām Babu to see the play. The poet Girīś Chandra Ghoṣ, the creator of the new-fashioned Bengali drama, appeared himself in the rôle of "Nim Chāṁd." I had read *Sadhabār Ekādaśī* before but after seeing the performance that evening, and especially the acting of "Nim Chāṁd," I was overwhelmed with joy. With the advance of age, I have forgotten many things, and perhaps I will forget many more; I have read many English, Bengali and Sanskrit dramas, and now I remember only the names of a few. But I shall never perhaps forget "Nim Chāṁd's" performance that evening, and from that evening my respect for Dīna Bandhu increased and I felt a special admiration for Girīś Chandra's great genius as an actor."[1] Dīna Bandhu Mitra also congratulated Girīś Chandra on his excellent acting, saying: "The play would not have been possible without you. It appears to me as if 'Nim Chāṁd' was created for you and you alone."[2] Truly speaking, *Sadhabār Ekādaśī* is a one-man play, and in the rôle of "Nim Chāṁd," Girīś Chandra had the

[1] This extract is from an article entitled "Dīna Bandhu Mitra", which is quoted by Amarendra Nāth Datta in his *Abhinetṛ-Kāhinī*, p. 17.

[2] See *Abhinetṛ-Kāhinī*, p. 17.

fullest opportunity for showing his very best. "Nim Chāṁd" is really an inimitable creation of the author; he is unforgettable and irresistible. And the way in which Girīś Chandra interpreted him left no doubt in the mind of his audience that at last a really great actor had appeared on the Bengali stage, who possessed a thorough understanding of the rôle in which he was appearing, and a sound knowledge of stage-technique.

The coming of Arddhendu Śekhar Mustaphī into Girīś Chandra's amateur theatrical company in connection with the production of *Sadhabār Ekādaśī* was an important event. Arddhendu Śekhar had already exhibited remarkable talents as a comedian in the performance of *Kichhu Kichhu Bujhi*.[1] There is an interesting little history about Arddhendu Śekhar's alliance with Girīś Chandra. Soon after the production of *Kichhu Kichhu Bujhi*, a friend of Girīś Chandra's (probably Nagendra Nāth Bannerji) told him that a certain very brilliant actor had lately appeared on the Bengali stage. This was, of course, Arddhendu Śekhar whom Girīś Chandra at that time did not know. Girīś Chandra expressed a desire to meet him. When Arddhendu came, to his utter astonishment, Girīś Chandra discovered that he was the same person who, as a little schoolboy, had many years before impressed him by his astonishing powers of mimicry even at that early age.[2] Girīś Chandra was delighted to have him as a colleague and felt greatly relieved to hand over some of the responsibilities of superintendence to him. Girīś Chandra was at that time working as a book-keeper in the firm of Messrs. Atkinson, Tilton & Co. and it was physically impossible for him to work all day at the office and then conduct the rehearsals at night. Arddhendu further undertook to coach the minor parts in the play and greatly impressed his colleagues by his ability as a conductor of rehearsals. In *Sadhabār Ekādaśī* he appeared in the rôle of "Jīban Chandra" and acted the part extremely well. Dīna Bandhu Mitra bears testimony to a skilful piece of improvisation in the play by Arddhendu. In the second

[1] See Chap. XVII, pp. 90–1.

[2] See *Svargīya Arddhendu Śekhar Mustaphī* (An "In Memoriam" which Girīś Chandra wrote a few days after the death of Arddhendu Śekhar and read to his audience during a performance at the "Minerva Theatre" on the 19th September, 1908), pp. 4–6 and 14–16.

scene of the first act, "Jīban Chandra" gives a parting kick to "Aṭal." This kick was not, however, originally mentioned in the play, but was introduced by Arddhendu on his own initiative. It proved so very appropriate to the occasion and dramatic in its effect that Dīna Bandhu noticed it and remarked to Arddhendu at the close of the play: "It was surely an improvement on the author that you gave that kick to 'Aṭal' as you went out. In my next edition I shall certainly add (Exit with a kick to 'Aṭal')."[1] Arddhendu had a real gift for such sudden improvisations, which sprang naturally out of his instinctive dramatic sense. He was a lovable personality, full of great wit and humour which as a coach and stage-director he brought into full play. He was a finished artist and his minute attention to every single detail, whether pronunciation, elocution, or pose, made him a very successful stage-teacher. Girīś Chandra spoke highly of the soundness and excellence of his method of teaching.[2]

The small band of Yātrā players which Girīś Chandra had organized as the nucleus of his Bāgbazar amateur theatrical company did not entirely go out of existence, even though its leader and founder was then devoting all his time and energy to the establishment of a permanent theatre. We are told[3] that after Girīś Chandra's successful production of *Sadhabār Ekādaśī*, some members of this Yātrā company remarked that it was easier to achieve fame on a modern stage than through the Yātrā. Girīś Chandra heard this, and in his usual youthful ardour told them that they should have a Yātrā performance again in eight days' time if they liked. Almost immediately Girīś Chandra began the necessary preparations for the production of *Uṣā-Haraṇ* (The Rape of Uṣā), a play written by Maṇi Lāl Sarkār. Girīś Chandra wrote about twenty-six songs for it. The performance took place exactly on the eighth day as promised.

[1] See *Svargīya Arddhendu Śekhar Mustaphī*, p. 5.

[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 17–24. Cf. Apareś Chandra Mukherji's two articles on "Arddhendu as a Teacher" which appeared in *Rūp O Raṅga*, Nos. 1 and 6, 1331 B.S. (A.D. 1924–5).

[3] See Amarendra Nāth Datta, *Abhinetṛ-Kāhinī*, pp. 18–19.

CHAPTER XIX

The National Theatre

Girīś Chandra now set himself to produce another play of Dīna Bandhu's called *Līlāvatī*. He arranged to have the performance this time on a much larger scale, with better scenery and costumes and on a permanent stage. The real beginnings of the "National Theatre" which was established in Calcutta a few years later may be traced back to this production of Dīna Bandhu's *Līlāvatī*. For this performance, Girīś Chandra had the assistance of a large number of energetic young men, among whom may be mentioned Gobinda Chandra Gāṅgulī, a large-hearted and wealthy gentleman from East Bengal, and Braja Nāth Deb, Girīś Chandra's brother-in-law. Gobinda Gāṅguli bore the expense of the rehearsals and other preliminary arrangements. Braja Nāth and Girīś Chandra, who were then both working as accountants in the firm of Messrs. Atkinson Tilton & Co., secured some arrears of money due to them on account of commission ; and this they spent for the construction of the stage. While the stage was being built on the grounds of a large house at Śyāmpukur, Braja Nāth suddenly died. All work ceased and rehearsals were discontinued. The half-finished platform of the stage was removed and fitted up temporarily on the grounds facing the house where the artist Dharma Dās was living. In the meantime, however, under the patronage of Akṣoy Chandra Sarkār and the famous Bengali novelist Baṅkim Chandra Chatterji, *Līlāvatī* (in a slightly altered and abridged form) was successfully staged at Chinsurah. The performance received favourable comment in the columns of the *Amrita Bazar Patrikā*. The news of the success of the same play by a rival party outside Calcutta naturally crushed any hope still left in the minds of Girīś Chandra's friends. Even Dīna Bandhu expressed to Arddhendu a doubt whether Girīś Chandra would ever be able to produce the play. Arddhendu

and the rest approached Girīś Chandra and said : "Look here, would you like to see us defeated by the Chinsurah party ?" At first Girīś Chandra did not know what to say, but as if unconsciously urged by the same irresistible impulse of rivalry which had so often before led him to success, replied, "Why, of course, we must produce the play and produce it without altering a single word of the author. Not only so, but we are going to beat the Chinsurah party." [1] Preparations began again with redoubled enthusiasm and rehearsals were started in full swing. Girīś Chandra and Arddhendu Śekhar shared between them the work of superintendence and coaching. The stage-architect, Dharma Dās Śūr, secured the services of a poor English sailor named McLean who had learned to paint on board ship, to help him in the painting of the scenery and offered him free board in return for his services.[2] A permanent stage was built in the house of Rājendra Lāl Pāl at Shāmbazar. Girīś Chandra composed all the lyrics and set them to appropriate music. The Bāgbazar amateur theatrical company now assumed the new title of "National Theatre." [3] The performance took place in July, 1871, and its success was phenomenal. Girīś Chandra describes how it impressed Dīna Bandhu, the author of the play : "Glad beyond words at our performance, Dīna Bandhu said to me, 'There can be no comparison between your performance and that of the Chinsurah party : I will write to Baṅkim crying shame on him.'" [4] Girīś Chandra also tells us how a Calcutta physician named Kānāi Lāl De came to him one day and told him that he had been to see the Tagores, and told them point blank that their performances, compared with this, was like "keeping a black crow in a golden cage." [5] *Līlāvatī* became so popular that it had to be performed every Saturday evening and every time before a crowded audience. People came in

[1] See *Abhinetṛ-Kāhinī*, p. 20, and *Svargīya Arddhendu Śekhar Mustaphī*, p. 18.

[2] See Śyāmā Prasād Mukherji's "The Bengali Theatre," *Calcutta Review*, January, 1924, p. 129.

[3] The name "National Theatre" was first suggested by Naba Gopāl Mitra, the editor of the *National Paper*. Naba Gopāl was so excessively fond of using the word "National" in everything he wrote that people of Bengal used to call him "National Naba Gopāl."

[4] See *Svargīya Arddhendu Śekhar Mustaphī*, p. 19.

[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 19–20.

such large numbers that the directors were compelled to issue free passes only to those who were capable of understanding the play. Still people kept on coming, asking for admission and producing certificates of their eligibility. After a continuous run of about a dozen performances, the play was stopped only on account of bad weather. Girīś Chandra appeared in the rôle of "Lalit" and Arddhendu as "Haribilās." The female parts were very well acted. Sureś Chandra Mitra appeared as "Līlāvatī," Amṛta Lāl Mukherji as "Sāradā Sundarī" and Kṣetra Mohan Gāṅgulī as "Rāj Lakṣmī." Dīna Bandhu Mitra congratulated Girīś Chandra on his superb acting: "I had not realized before that my poetry could be so beautifully read; take this compliment at least." [1]

The "National Theatre" now took up *Nīldarpaṇ*,[2] the most famous and sensational play of Dīna Bandhu Mitra. The players met every evening for rehearsals in a large building on the bank of the Ganges, given to them for the purpose by Bhuban Mohan Niyogī, a relative of the artist Dharma Dās Śūr. Everything was running very smoothly and the play was almost ready to be put on the stage when an unfortunate incident occurred. It arose out of a difference of opinion between Girīś Chandra and some of his associates. Arddhendu and several others of the company in the light of experience so far gained, came to the conclusion that it was no longer necessary to issue free tickets. They, therefore, proposed that there should be a charge for admission, the proceeds to go to the maintenance of the theatre. Girīś Chandra did not like the idea at all, and opposed it, maintaining that the time had not come to give up the amateur character of the theatre and make it a professional affair. He argued that the "National Theatre" was not yet equipped well enough to justify the sale of tickets and it would be sheer disgrace to accept money and not to be able to give a good return for it. But Girīś Chandra's arguments failed to convince those

[1] See *Abhinetṛ-Kāhinī*, p. 21.

[2] It is difficult to find a satisfactory English equivalent for "Nīldarpaṇ." Literally translated it is "indigo-mirror" or "blue-mirror." Probably the author's intention was to suggest that his drama faithfully reflected the truth about the indigo question. For a discussion of the play itself see Chap. XX, pp. 108–10.

of the company who supported Arddhendu's new proposal. The independent and free-spirited Girīś Chandra instantly left the "National Theatre" and only a handful of his own supporters such as Mahendra Lāl Bannerji, Yogendra Nāth Mitra and Rādhā Mādhab Kar followed him. It has been generally supposed that this unfortunate breach was the outcome of rivalry between Girīś Chandra and Arddhendu for leadership. But this has been expressly denied by Girīś Chandra himself, who declared that he retired from the "National Theatre" purely on account of a regrettable but honest difference of opinion.[1] The mantle of Girīś Chandra now naturally fell upon Arddhendu Śekhar, who became the director of the theatre. Without delay he began to study the part of "Mr. Wood" in which Girīś Chandra was to have appeared, and made the necessary re-distribution of the other parts. In fact, it was from this point that Arddhendu's eventful career on the Bengali stage both as an actor and stage-director really began. The first performance of *Nīldarpaṇ* took place on the 7th December, 1872, at the Joṛasāṁko house of Madhu Sūdan Sānyāl (now 365, Upper Chitpur Road, Calcutta), and second performance a week after on the 14th December. The proceeds of the sale of tickets for the first two performances amounted to more than five hundred rupees. It was a clear proof that Arddhendu was right in believing that the Bengali public was prepared to pay for the pleasure of witnessing Bengali plays. *Nīldarpaṇ* marked the beginning of a new development in the history of the Bengali stage, namely, the gradual disappearance of amateur performances from public theatres.

The "National Theatre" under the guidance of Arddhendu Śekhar Mustaphī began to prosper. It took up in succession two new plays of Dīna Bandhu Mitra, *Jāmāi Bārik* (A Barack for Sons-in-law)[2] and *Nabīn Tapasvinī* (The Ascetic Maiden).[3] The first was performed in 1872 on two occasions, the 21st and 28th December, and the second on the 4th January, 1873 for the first time. The "National Theatre" showed a preference for farces and comedies rather than serious plays. The reason was

[1] See *Svargīya Arddhendu Śekhar Mustaphī*, pp. 12 ff.
[2] For a description of the play itself see Chap. XX, p. 113.
[3] For a fuller account of the play itself, see Chap. XX, pp. 110–11.

probably that Arddhendu himself was generally at his best in a comic part. The list of comedies staged by the "National Theatre" includes Yatīndra Mohan Tagore's *Yeman Karma Temni Phal*, *Nayśo Rupāyā* (Nine Hundred Rupees) by Śiśir Kumār Ghoṣ, *Abiśvāsī Nārī* (The Faithless Woman), *Sub-Deputy Examination*, *Model School* and a host of other light farces and burlesques. Arddhendu reached the height of his power in the rôle of "Jaladhar" in *Nabīn Tapasvinī*. Another notable success was his acting of "Chhaṭulāl" in *Nayśo Rupāyā*. Even those who were extremely sceptical about the dramatic capacities of Bengalis maintained that Arddhendu had no equal even among the very best actors in the English theatres. The real secret of Arddhendu's success on the stage is not far to seek. His voice, his power of mimicry, his comic intonations and gesticulations were so distinctly original and so perfect of their kind that his audience cared very little about the rôle he took; they saw only Arddhendu and applauded him every time he appeared on the stage. He had almost an hypnotic influence on his audience. He lived in his part and made it seem real. He was essentially that kind of master-player whose performances have the effect not only of great acting but of complete identification with the part. His admirers went even to the length of calling him by the names of some of the characters which he impersonated. People called him, for instance, "Sāhib Arddhendu" simply on account of the rôle of an Englishman in which he appeared in a farce of his own called *Mustaphī Sāhibkā Pākkā Tāmāsā* (Mr. Mustaphī's Great Skit). This play was written as a witty repartee to a humorous sketch by an Englishman named Dave Carson produced at the "Chowringhee Opera House." Arddhendu used to appear in this farce dressed as a typical Englishman, mimic him, play the violin and sing: "I am the greatest Englishman on earth, none can be compared with me."[1] Thus, with the help of all sorts of ingenious impromptus and inventions in every part he took, he impressed his personality upon his audiences. His complete freedom from self-consciousness combined with his

[1] See *Svargīya Arddhendu Śekhar Mustaphī*, p. 8.

thorough mastery of stage-technique made his comic art so vivid and real on the stage that the effect survived in the minds of his audience even long after the curtain had fallen.

Girīś Chandra did not remain entirely inactive while the "National Theatre" was flourishing and steadily growing in popularity. He wrote the libretto of a short musical comedy for his Bāgbazar Amateur Yātrā Company which was then still in existence. He put into it, in a spirit of good-natured fun, a very dexterously worded alliterative song, in which he caricatured the defects and personal idiosyncrasies of most of the actors and leading personalities of the "National Theatre."[1] Meanwhile, he devoted most of his time to serious study and waited for his opportunities to come. It was not long before the supporters of the "National Theatre" grew tired of Dīna Bandhu's plays and the continuous performances of comic dramas; the result was a diminution in the receipts of the theatre. The management felt that it must produce a new and different type of play if it were to retrieve the fortunes of the theatre. They finally decided to revive Madhu Sūdan Datta's *Kṛṣṇa Kumārī* and produce it in a thoroughly up-to-date style. But the "National Theatre" had no one on its staff competent to take the rôle of "Bhīm Siṁha," the most important male character in the play. It occurred to them that Girīś Chandra was the only man who could do full justice to the rôle, and forgetting all their past differences, they approached him and begged him to join them once more. Girīś Chaṅdra agreed on condition that it should be distinctly mentioned in the play-bill that he was appearing as an amateur. They were rather unwilling to accept conditions of any kind and Arddhendu was even urged by his friends to refuse. But Girīś Chandra remained inexorable until they yielded. *Kṛṣṇa Kumārī* made its appearance on the stage of the "National Theatre" on the 22nd February, 1873. Kṣetra Mohan Gāṅgulī appeared in the rôle of "Kṛṣṇa Kumārī." With Girīś Chandra in an important rôle, the "National Theatre" was naturally packed to its fullest capacity at every performance of this play, and enthusiasm ran high.

[1] See *Abhinetṛ-Kāhinī*, pp. 22–3.

CHAPTER XX

Dīna Bandhu Mitra

(1829–73)

(*a*) *As a Writer of Serious Drama*

At this point it may be well to turn aside from the history of the "National Theatre" to examine more carefully the plays of Dīna Bandhu Mitra so that we may be able to estimate his contribution to the development of the Bengali drama. As a young man Dīna Bandhu came under the direct influence of English education. He was one of the best students of his time at the Hoogli College and the Hindu College. Even as a schoolboy in the Calcutta Hare school, he began writing Bengali verse and showed a great love for poetry and the drama. He studied English literature with great interest and avidity and assimilated the new ideas which had come in as a result of the closer contact of Bengal with Western civilization. He was an ardent disciple of Īśvar Chandra Gupta who was the dominating personality in Bengali literature and journalism at that time. He contributed poems and articles regularly to Īśvar Chandra Gupta's paper *Sambād Prabhākar* and another periodical, called *Sādhu Rañjan.* The influence of Īśvar Chandra Gupta as a great wit left such a strong impress upon the youthful genius of Dīna Bandhu that in his later life and work he carried the tradition of Iśvar Gupta and sometimes even to rather ridiculous extremes.

In 1855, Dīna Bandhu began his career as a Postmaster in Patna, and in less than two years, he was promoted to be an Inspecting Postmaster in the province of Orissa. Later he was transferred to the Nadia District of Bengal. From Nadia he came to Dacca, and for several years afterwards, he was alternately in Nadia and Dacca before he came to live permanently in Kṛṣṇanagar. About 1870, he removed to Calcutta and there

in recognition of his services the Government conferred upon him the title of "Rai Bahadur." *Nīldarpaṇ*, published in 1860, was his first work. It was written at a time when the English indigo-planters were putting all kinds of unjustifiable pressure upon the *rāyats* of Bengal to make them grow indigo. In the course of his tours through the country in the discharge of his official duties, Dīna Bandhu had gathered a first-hand knowledge of the actual condition of the Bengali peasantry and collected a large amount of reliable information in regard to the alleged oppression of the English planters, and this he used as the material of his play. Being a Government officer, he had to publish the work, in the first place, anonymously. It was immediately translated into English and sent to England in order that the British Government might know the real facts about the indigo-industry in Bengal and the abuses connected with it. The popularity of the play further increased when a libel prosecution was brought in the Calcutta Supreme Court at the instance of the "Landholders and Commercial Association of British India" against the translator, Rev. James Long, and the printer and publisher of the English version. The suit elicited the information that through official inadvertence, copies of the English translation of the publication were sent to influential persons in England and India under the seal and frank of the Bengal Government. The editors of the *Englishman* and *Bengal Hurkara* also took part in the legal proceedings claiming that the publication had stated that "their columns were filled with the praises" of the English indigo-planters. The famous trial of the *Nīldarpaṇ* case of "Queen *vs.* Long" came to an end on the 24th July, 1861, before a special jury presided over by Justice Sir Mordaunt L. Wells. Mr. Long was found guilty and sentenced to one month's imprisonment and to pay a fine of one thousand rupees.[1] The judgment was very much resented by all sections of the Bengali community and naturally aroused widespread indignation.

[1] See *History of Indigo Disturbance* (with full reports of the Nīldarpaṇ case) by Lalit Chandra Mitra, Calcutta, 1909; also "The History of the Nīldarpaṇ, with the state trial of the Rev. J. Long" (reprinted from the *Englishman*), Calcutta, 1861; "Trial of the Rev. J. Long for the publication of Nīldarpaṇ with documents connected with its official circulation," London, 1861; J. Long, *Strike but Hear!* (Evidence explanatory of the Indigo System in Lower Bengal), Calcutta, 1861.

Kālī Prasanna Siṁha came forward and offered Mr. Long one thousand rupees, which he accepted. As a result of all this *Nīldarpaṇ* came into unexpected prominence; the name of the author became generally known, and his literary fame followed as a natural consequence.

The play describes how the complete ruin of a wealthy Bengali Kāyastha, named Golak Basu, is brought about by the English indigo-planters. The chief *dramatis personæ* are Golak's wife, sons and daughters-in-law; two indigo-planters, Mr. Wood and Mr. Rogue, their dewans and factory servants; the Magistrate of the District and a sweetmeat seller who is also a procuress. First we see the planters appear on the scene and glory in the violence they have done to the *rāyats*, using the foulest language. Then we are shown how two brave *rāyats*, Śyāmchāṁd and Rām Kānta, tenants of Golak Basu, are forcibly taken to the "kuthi" (i.e. the godown of the planter) where the planter in person flogs and kicks them for refusing to accept "dādan."[1] We are further told how false law-suits are brought against the innocent villagers for declining to grow indigo on their land; how these cases are summarily tried by the Magistrate who is in league with the planters; how villages are burnt down and Hindu women are made to suffer unthinkable humiliation. In the end, we find that Golak Basu hangs himself, and his son Nabīn Mādhab, who has his skull fractured by blows from the planter, dies of injuries; and Sāvitrī, after having lost both her husband and son, goes mad and also dies.

As a drama, strictly speaking, *Nīldarpaṇ* is an insignificant production. It is neither well-written nor does it lend itself to successful production on the stage. Many of its unpleasant scenes (notably Scene 3, Act I; Scene 1, Act II; Scene 2, Act V) are entirely unsuitable for dramatic representation. It deals with a most gruesome story in which horror is piled on horror, and everything seems to be covered with slime and mud. It is quite probable that the atrocious cruelties and tortures which the play describes were actually committed by the English

[1] It was the practice of the indigo-planters to make advance, i.e. "dādan," to cultivators on the understanding that they were to raise a crop of indigo and sell it at a certain approved price to the planter who had made the advance.

planters, and that the author was inspired by a sincere desire to deal with real life and real incidents. But drama is much more than a merely faithful representation of real life or real events. "The illusion of a higher reality," which, according to Aristotle, is the real purpose of drama, cannot be achieved by either strict logic or bare presentation of literal truth. It can only be attained by a certain kind of imaginative verisimilitude. A true dramatist must present truth through a veil of fiction. He may select his material from the gross world of reality, but he must build up another world of fancy, creating a just balance between the ideal and the actual. He must not consider the dramatic art merely as a channel of advertising or ventilating grievances. There must be, of course, a certain "purposiveness without purpose," to use an expression of Kant's, but to reject "fiction" in its true dramatic sense is to miss the real driving force of all creative art. The fact is that in *Nīldarpaṇ*, what Dīna Bandhu attempted was to deal only with what he himself thought to be true, in its most naked and unvarnished form, without the slightest regard for dramatic fitness or propriety. His principal aim was to awaken sympathy for those who suffered, and indignation against those who inflicted the sufferings. But curiously enough, the first natural reaction to the play is to shrink from these horrors and these scenes of ghastly cruelty. It was quite unnecessary to fill the entire story with blood and torture, suffering and death, even though it was intended to be a genuine tragedy. Temperamentally, the dramatist was so much moved by the inhuman cruelties of indigo industry which he quite conceivably had seen enacted before his eyes, that it was impossible for him to bring a sense of detachment to bear upon his writing of the drama. Putting aside the question of the laws of higher drama, *Nīldarpan* abounds in verse written in a very ornate and artificial style and also much pedantic prose. The descriptions, though quite touching in places, miss their mark on account of elaboration and exaggeration.

Dīna Bandhu's second serious drama, *Nabīn Tapasvinī* was published in 1865, five years after *Nīldarpaṇ*. During this long period of literary inaction people almost began to think that there was after all nothing very extraordinary about the dramatic gifts

of Dīna Bandhu and that *Nīldarpaṇ* must have owed its sensational popularity only to certain special circumstances of the time. But *Nabīn Tapasvinī* dispelled such misgivings and established his reputation as a playwright without question. This is a much more coherent and better constructed play than *Nīldarpaṇ*, although the plot itself is a bit involved. It tells the story of a king Ramaṇī Mohan, who takes a second wife while the first is still alive and is in an advanced state of pregnancy. The first queen indignantly leaves the royal palace, accompanied by a faithful maid. In her exile she gives birth to a son. In the meantime, the newly-married queen dies. The king repents and wishes his first queen would come back. His friends and courtiers, however, urge him to marry Kāminī, the beautiful daughter of one of his chief ministers. The king refuses and bides his time. After seventeen years of wandering in many lands, the queen comes back at last with her son, who by now has grown to be a handsome prince. Both are dressed as hermits and nobody recognizes them. The prince Bijay falls in love with Kāminī and wishes to marry her, but Kāminī's father, not knowing the identity of the prince and suspecting him to be a trespasser, has him arrested and brought before the king for trial. Recognition follows ; the king welcomes back his long-lost queen and the prince Bijay is happily married to Kāminī. Some of the minor characters in the play such as Rati Kānta and Jagadambā are very finely drawn and appear even more real and lively on the stage than the leading ones. In fact, the play is noteworthy chiefly for the character of Jaladhar and the scenes in which two charming girls Mallikā and Mālatī appear. The author introduces into the dialogues here and there some very fine poetic passages, most of which are written in rhymed couplets, expressing both comic and serious ideas.

Līlāvatī was Dīna Bandhu's last serious play, published in 1876. It was preceded by his three well-known comedies which we shall discuss later on. In *Līlāvatī*, Dīna Bandhu showed a decidedly better command over his material and much more originality in the handling of the plot. The story is somewhat complicated. Līlāvatī is the daughter

of a well-to-do Kulīn Brāhmaṇ, Hari Bilās Chatterji, who desires to give her in marriage to a debauched young man named Nader Chāṁd, simply because the boy happens to belong to the Kulīn caste. Līlāvatī, however, is secretly in love with another youth, Lalit Mohan by name, whom her father had adopted as a son, since his eldest son Arabinda had run away from home and remained untraced for twelve years. Hari Bilās is opposed to Līlāvatī's marrying Lalit Mohan. Śrī Nāth, the brother-in-law of Hari Bilās, Kṣīrod Bāsinī, wife of Arabinda and Siddheśvar, a friend of Lalit Mohan, all try to dissuade Hari Bilās from marrying his daughter to Nader Chāṁd, but in vain. The disappointed Lalit leaves the house of Hari Bilās, who now decides to adopt still another son. Meanwhile, it becomes known that the girl Champā, the daughter of Hari Bilās's mistress, has been secretly travelling with Arabinda in different countries. Champā dressed as Arabinda suddenly appears, and Arabinda himself comes back a few days later with Lalit Mohan. A very complicated situation now arises. After much confusion in regard to the real identity of Arabinda, Champā reveals herself, explains everything and reconciles the estranged father and son. The play ends happily in the marriage of Lalit Mohan and Līlāvatī. It is obvious that there is a good deal of variety in the story, and Dīna Bandhu was successful in moulding it into a presentable shape without any appreciable loss in the unity of the theme itself. The play aims at criticizing the defects and absurdities of Kulīnism, and thus belongs to the same class of plays as Rām Nārāyaṇ's *Kulīn-Kul-Sarbasva* and *Naba Nāṭak*.

Dīna Bandhu was a very shrewd and acute observer of social manners and of everything else that he happened to see around him. He had stored in his mind an infinite number of small incidents which he had observed at a very close range. He was in the habit of collecting these stories while travelling in different parts of the country. In his plays, he drew largely from the actual incidents and experiences of his life and sometimes even modelled his characters on people whom he had personally known. The famous Bengali novelist Baṅkim Chandra Chatterji, a friend and contemporary of Dīna Bandhu, identifies the originals of

some of his characters and also incidentally shows his indebtedness to Bengali folk-lore and to English literature.[1] Dīna Bandhu was reputed to be a very charming story-teller. He had wonderful gifts of conversation and he never failed to delight his hearers with his lively wit and polished speech. In the company of friends, Dīna Bandhu was, as Bankim Chandra remarks, "laughter personified, a veritable magician of laughter."[2]

(*b*) *As a Writer of Comedy*

Dīna Bandhu was a born humorist, but his humour was of a rather peculiar kind. It was coarse and even indecent at times. In private life, Dīna Bandhu was a man of exceptionally correct and dignified conduct, so one really wonders why he should have indulged in such gross obscenities in his plays and such aberrations of humour as seem to suggest that he was obsessed by a sheer love of the lewd and filthy. Baṅkim Chandra Chatterji strongly urged Dīna Bandhu not to publish *Sadhabār Ekādaśī* without certain modifications. He was quite apprcciative of its merits as a play, but objected to its lack of good taste.[3] It was not merely a lack of taste but a distinct lack of emotional balance which made Dīna Bandhu's comic art so one-sided. "Genuine humour and true wit," as Landor defines them, "require a sound and capacious mind, which is always a grave one." As an artist, Dīna Bandhu was quite justified in exposing mercilessly the sophistries and shams of his age, but not in flagrantly disregarding the dramatic proprieties, by perpetrating pictures of mere naked realism, quite lacking in true artistic quality. His comedies remind one very much of thosc grotesque stories of unimaginable crimes and perverse passions, *Les Diaboliques* of Barbey d'Aurévilly. His biting cynicism is nowhere more clearly revealed than in those erotic scenes which he deliberately over-colours and makes obscenely suggestive. He analysed without malice, but never without prcjudice. The worst fault of his humour was that he was fond of exaggerating real life. In *Biye Pāglā Buṛo*, published in 1866, he carried to

[1] *Dīna Bandhu Jībanī* (The Life of Dīna Bandhu), p. 9.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 12.
[3] *Ibid.*, p. 10.

an extreme the most unpleasant theme of an old man's sexual obsessions. *Jāmāi Bārik* (1872), which satirized the outlandish custom among the parents of the Kulīn caste of providing sons-in-law with permanent free quarters and board so as to be able to keep their daughters at home, presents an extremely exaggerated picture of the social evil itself. *Sadhabār Ekādaśī* (1869) is marred by too many tipsy scenes and too much talk about wine and drunkenness. Moral depravity and folly are exaggerated in it beyond description. "Folly is," surely, "the natural prey of the Comic Spirit," as George Meredith says, but a true comic artist does not necessarily paint folly blacker than it really is. In the domain of art, a line cannot be drawn between what is strictly moral and what is not, but it is quite easy to distinguish an exaggerated picture of villainy and vice from a real one. The fact is that Dīna Bandhu was not always guided by that real imaginative insight, by means of which one may see into the heart of things. In attempting to present truth as he sees it, he only provokes our disgust. His analysis and exposure of human follies and idiosyncrasies only distort and disfigure them. All his æsthetic sensibility and his elegant and erudite style do not save us from the feeling of nausea produced by the morbid tone of his comedies. In this respect, he was a true disciple of Īśvar Chandra Gupta. He inherited all the great qualities and all the great faults of his master. Their comic sense and standards of taste were of the same brand, with only one difference that Dīna Bandhu showed a greater resourcefulness and range in his means of expression. He not only carried Īśvar Chandra Gupta's tradition in the field of naturalism or realism but even went farther. Being a man of strong sympathies, he idealized what he saw, good or bad. His hyper-sensitiveness and the unusual strength of his personal feelings irresistibly influenced his writing. The result was that his productions had, on the one hand, so much of naked realism and on the other, were so highly coloured by his own personal emotions that they ceased to be real in the true sense of the term. Each of his comedies, therefore, sinks to the level of crude farce ; and we are left to try to put together the sum of its elements, sometimes beautiful and sometimes erotic, sometimes humorous

and sometimes merely burlesque, and to get from them what sort of amusement we can. Baṅkim Chandra Chatterji has very rightly said that Dīna Bandhu did not have the understanding of what is truly "subtle, soft, sweet, natural, tenderly sad and deep" in human nature.[1] If we bear in mind these serious limitations of Dīna Bandhu's art, we see why his plays eventually bored playgoers, and why the management of the "National Theatre" was compelled to reject them and revive Madhu Sūdan's *Kṛṣṇa-Kumārī* to save the theatre from financial ruin.

[1] *Dīna Bandhu Jībanī*, p. 16.

CHAPTER XXI

The Successors of the National Theatre

With the production of Madhu Sūdan's *Kṛṣṇa-Kumārī*, the "National Theatre" recovered its former reputation and was once more the recipient of public sympathy and support. To put the theatre on a sound financial footing and to facilitate its administration, the management was now placed in the hands of three directors, namely, Śiśir Kumār Ghoṣ (the founder of the nationalist paper, *Amṛta Bazar Patrikā*), Debendra Nāth Bannerji and Girīś Chandra himself. After a short time, however, fresh signs of disagreement manifested themselves. Two rival parties grew up; one led by Nagendra Nāth Bannerji and Amṛta Lāl Basu and the other by Dharma Dās Śūr and Mahendra Lāl Basu. Girīś Chandra remained neutral. Internal disensions, aggravated by the bitterest personal feeling, soon reached such a point that reconciliation was out of the question. So in the month of July, 1873, the "National Theatre" was closed.

But this did not destroy the public enthusiasm for the theatre. A new theatre company was soon formed by Śarat Chandra Ghoṣ, who used to be a regular supporter of the "National Theatre." With the aid of Bihārī Lāl Chatterji and Akhil Chandra Chatterji, Śarat Chandra Ghoṣ set up a theatre in a thatched house in front of the mansion of his grandfather, Chhaṭu Babu in Beadon Street. It was opened on the 16th August, 1873, with the name of "Bengal Theatre." One of the new features of this theatre was its employment of professional actresses. The "Bengal Theatre" staged *Śarmiṣṭhā*, *Māyā Kānan* (The Garden of Illusion), *Biṣ Ki Dhaṇurguṇ ?* (Poison or Bow String ?) and several other plays. The most successful among the performances at this theatre was that of a brilliant comedy of the most sensational kind, called *Uh ! Mohanter e Ki Kāj !* (Oh ! What a Way for a Mohanta to Behave !). Several members of the rival parties of

the defunct "National Theatre" wished to witness one of the performances of this play, but so great was the rush for tickets, that none of either party was able to secure a seat. Common disappointment brought the rivals again together. The incident was very trifling, but it kindled in them a common desire to establish once more a new and united theatre of their own. The two rival leaders, Dharma Dās Śūr and Nagendra Nāth Bannerji made up their quarrel and both promised to bring their followers together to help build up a new theatre to be constructed at the expense of Bhuban Mohan Niyogī. The theatre was styled the "Great National Theatre" and was built on the model of one of the European play-houses in Calcutta, called the "Lewis Theatre." A play entitled *Kāmya Kānan* (The Delectable Garden) was selected for the opening performance, which took place on the 31st December, 1873. A fire broke out in the middle of the performance, but no great damage was done. Some time later, Girīś Chandra joined this theatre as an amateur, with his dramatized version of Baṅkim Chandra Chatterji's *Mṛṇālinī*, which was successfully produced in February, 1874. In the meantime, Bhuban Mohan Niyogī severed his connection with the company and Girīś Chandra became the managing director. In 1874 and 1875, Girīś Chandra produced in succession the dramatized versions of Baṅkim Chandra's *Biṣa Bṛkṣa* (The Poison Tree) and *Durgeś Nandinī* (The Chieftain's Daughter); of Nabīn Chandra Sen's *Palāśir Yuddha* (The Battle of Plassey) and of Madhu Sūdan Datta's epic *Meghnād Badh* (The Slaying of Meghnād). But the most noteworthy production during this period was the dramatized version of Baṅkim's *Kapāl Kuṇḍalā* on the 14th February, 1874.[1] Girīś Chandra himself also wrote and presented several original musical dramas. In the midst of his renewed activities his wife died, and he was so overwhelmed with grief that he left the theatre and went away to Bhāgalpur as a book-keeper of an English firm. He came back to Calcutta after a few months and was employed as an accountant in the firm of Messrs. Parker and Co., Ltd. Pratāp Chandra Jahurī,

[1] A previous performance of the play by some of the members of the original "National Theatre" had already taken place on the 10th May, 1873, in the house of Rādhā Kānta Deb, the Rājā of Sobhābazar.

the owner of the " Great National Theatre " at that time, offered Girīś Chandra the managing directorship at a monthly salary of one hundred rupees. Girīś Chandra accepted it, resigned his post, and for the first time became a professional on the Bengali stage.

From this point began a most eventful period in the history of the Bengali theatre, almost every part of which is associated with the activities and achievements of Girīś Chandra Ghoṣ, whether as an original writer or as an actor or as a producer. His remarkable ability as an actor was already widely recognized. But he had not as yet made any successful attempt at writing serious drama of his own. His passion for the stage, however great, had expressed itself so far only in sporadic activities. Now as a professional and the director of the " Grand National Theatre," the path of his future career was clear before him. He began to write. *Rāvaṇabadh* (The Slaying of Rāvaṇa), a Paurāṇic play in five acts written in verse, was his first genuine dramatic work. It was performed for the first time on the 16th Śrāban, 1288 B.S. or 1881 A.D. After completing *Rāvaṇabadh*, he dramatized Rameś Chandra Datta's famous novel *Mādhavī-Kaṅkan*, which was immediately and successfully produced. Among Girīś Chandra's own plays produced between 1881 and 1882, the following may be mentioned : (1) Two short musical comedies : *Māyā Taru* (The Tree of Illusion) and *Mohinī Pratimā* (The Magic Statue) ; (2) Poetic dramas based on the *Rāmāyaṇa* : *Sītār Banabās* (The Exile of Sītā) in four acts, *Rāmer Banabās* (The Exile of Rāma) in five acts, *Sītār Bibāha* (The Marriage of Sītā) in three acts, *Sītā Haraṇ* (The Rape of Sītā) consisting of five acts, *Lakṣmaṇ Barjjan* (The Rejection of Lakṣmaṇ), a playlet in eight scenes ; (3) Other poetic dramas : *Abhimanyu-Badh* (The Slaying of Abhimanyu), a Paurāṇic drama in five acts, *Malin Mālā* (The Faded Garland) in five acts, based on an Indian tale of romance ; *Ānanda Raho*, a historical play in five acts, dealing with the Mogul Emperor Akbar and his Rajput allies and rivals ; *Pāṇḍaver Ajñātabās* (The Pāṇḍavas' Incognito), a four-act mythological drama, based on a well-known story in the *Mahābhārata* ; *Bhoṭ Maṅgal*, a farce and *Braja Bihār* (Rambles in Braja), an opera.

None of these original dramatic contributions of Girīś Chandra to the repertoire of the " Great National Theatre " are of a very high order, which is hardly surprising, considering the comparatively short time within which they were produced. It will be observed that Girīś Chandra tried his hand at almost every form of play-writing—poetic, historical, comic, musical and operatic. The most striking feature to be noticed about these works is his gift for song-writing. Most of the plays are almost completely written in verse and drawn from the Epics and Purāṇas. Not only in the actual treatment of the themes themselves, but in the whole method of handling the Paurāṇic stories, he followed very closely Kāśī Rām Dās and Kṛttibās. Let us consider *Pāṇḍaver Ajñātabās*, a very typical play of this period, as an illustration of his method. The story is taken from the " Birāṭ Parva " of the *Mahābhārata* of Kāśī Rām Dās. The four acts of the play are scrupulously modelled on the four principal subdivisions of the chapter in the original. The most striking similarity appears in the language of the two works. Take, for instance, the opening lines of the play which Birāṭa addresses to Yudhiṣṭhira or Yudhiṣṭhira's reply to Birāṭa's speech, or again, Uttarā's announcement before Draupadī is to appear on the scene (Scene 2, Act I), in all of which Girīś Chandra reproduces the verse of Kāśī Rām Dās almost verbatim. Many other similar instances might be mentioned almost at random. But in fairness, it must be noted that Girīś Chandra invented several scenes (e.g. Scenes 2 and 6, Act I) and episodes (e.g. Scene 3, Act I) and made much fuller portraits of the principal characters than are to be found in Kāśī Rām Dās. The fact is that at this early period, Girīś Chandra was merely trying to find his way and experimenting. If a comparison is made of *Pāṇḍaver Ajñātabās* with a similar Paurāṇic play of his maturer period, like *Pāṇḍava-Gaurab* (The Glory of the Pāṇḍavas), the deficiencies of Girīś Chandra's craftsmanship between 1881 and 1882 will be evident. Moreover, the poetic drama has very distinct limitations of its own and perfection in the art is rarely attainable. Bengal, as we know, had a large amount of older literature of the type of poetic drama, which never really attained any high degree of excellence. Rhyme is a thing which is familiar to Bengalis in their daily hymns, chants

and the like. There were plenty of dramatic and semi-dramatic occasions on which verse was always declaimed, but the reciters had neither taste nor a sound dramatic tradition to guide them. Their poetry had seldom enough skill to be effective, except in a very emotional way. The professional writers were also crude, boisterously melodramatic, and worse. As a matter of fact, the influence of the traditions of this type of poetic plays was so strong upon Girīś Chandra that between 1881–2, he found himself unable to break away from them completely. He turned to the Purāṇas for inspiration and wrote in verse, without having acquired meanwhile the power of presenting the older themes in a modern style, or even of making his verse sufficiently dramatic to be really effective. But coming in daily contact with the professional stage he readily attained as an actor a greater freedom of movement, more originality in intonation and delivery, more poise and knowledge of rhythm and metre. At this time he showed a special talent in dealing with heroic and declamatory parts.

The " Great National Theatre " under Girīś Chandra's management continued to flourish. It may be of interest to reproduce a characteristic play-bill[1] of this theatre, which, for its bombastic and exaggerated language, is not entirely unlike a modern American film poster. There are some misprints, but it is reproduced without modification :

Saturday and Sunday, 28th and 29th May
National Theatre, 6 Beadon Street

Saturday, the 28th May, 1881.

At 9 p.m. will be repeated with necessary improvements and additional grandeur that new and historical drama by Girīs Chandra Ghoṣ

Anando Raho or *Akbar*

This drama is no stale story, told in dull monotonous dialogue, nor is the work crammed with tremendous tiring octavo speeches and soliloquies. The greatest statesman and mightiest monarch Akbar is portrayed with a truly histrionic pen.

[1] See J. Campbell Oman, *Cults, Customs, and Superstitions of India*, part II, chap. I, p. 200.

The dying speech of Rana Pratap will bring tears from every human eye !

The scene where Akbar suffers from the effects of poison, falling a victim to his own malicious machinations, that monarch of monarchs whose single breath could one day change the fortune of this vast Indian Empire suffering all the untold tortures of hell in his secluded pavilion in the centre of a tank, and now so poor as to console his burning soul or pour a drop of water on his scalded tongue, this awfully grand scene we say will have an impression in the mind of the spectator never to be effaced, and impart a lesson illustrative of the Truth, that the crooked path of policy is always perilous !

Betal—A quite original and strictly national character, sublime and magnanimous will be played by Girīs Chandra Ghoṣ.

Soul dissolving songs—where religion and love are harmoniously blended together—will even for the instant inspire confidence and love for God in the heart of the most ungodly !

Scenes—As for our scenic grandeur we need only say " Come and See."

Next day, Sunday, at 6 p.m., that
sparkling
melodrama

Magic Statue

All the local papers have spoken highly of this piece both as a practical production and stage play.

Please note—This is that well received play in the *finale* of which marble statues are transformed into living beauties.

G. C. Ghosh,
Manager.

During the latter part of 1882, sharp differences of opinion arose between Girīś Chandra and the owner of the theatre, Pratāp Chandra Jahurī on the question of increasing the salary of the actors and actresses. Girīś Chandra left the theatre and with the financial assistance of a wealthy Bengali gentleman, Durmukh Rāy, established in 1883 the " Star Theatre " at No. 68, Beadon Street. Amṛta Lāl Basu and Amṛta Lāl Mukherji also joined him. Girīś Chandra produced at this theatre in succession three of his new plays : *Dakṣa Yajña* (The Sacrifice of Dakṣa), *Dhruba Charitra* (The Life of Dhruba) and *Nala-Damayantī*. All three are based on the *Mahābhārata* and written in verse and each contains four acts. Between 1884–87, the following plays

of Girīś Chandra were produced at this theatre: *Brṣa Ketu*, a one-act Paurāṇic drama; *Kamale Kāminī* (The Lady of the Lotus), first produced on the 29th March, 1884,—a play based on the popular folk-tale of thc merchant Śrīmanta, which belongs to the Chaṇḍī-Maṅgal cycle, written in verse and consisting of four acts, with a small additional act at the end; *Śrībatsa-Chintā*, a Paurāṇic drama in four acts, written in prose and verse; *Prahlād Charitra* (The Life of Prahlād), a mythological drama in verse in one act; *Prabhās Yajña* (The Sacrifice at Prabhās), a poetic play in four acts on a Paurāṇic theme; *Hīrār Phul* (The Pearl-Flower), a musical drama in one act, dealing with the Apsarās or the celestial beauties; *Bellik Bājār* (The Market of Fools), first produced on the 24th December, 1886, a farce in one act, which ends with a Christmas song in English; *Rup-Sanātan*, a five-act drama in prose and verse on the two disciples of Śrī Chaitanya; *Buddhadeb Charit* (The Life of Buddha), a religious drama in verse in five acts based on Edwin Arnold's "Light of Asia"; *Chaitanya Līlā*, first performed on the 2nd August, 1884, written in prose and verse and consisting of four acts, and its sequel *Nimāi Sanyās* (Nimāi's Renunciation), also in four acts, first produced on the 7th February, 1885, and *Bilva Maṅgal Ṭhākur* (The Brāhmaṇ Bilva Maṅgal), consisting of four acts.

The last five in the above list were religious plays—an experiment with a new material. The life and work of Śrī Chaitanya, the great Vaiṣṇava saint of Bengal, on which *Rup-Sanātan*, *Chaitanya-Līlā* and *Nimāi Sanyās* are based, contain a large numbcr of dramatic incidents, suitable for representation on the stage. Especially, the renunciation of Nimāi, as Śrī Chaitanya was called in his boyhood, as described by the various Vaiṣṇava writers, is full of genuine pathos and emotion. When these religious plays of Girīś Chandra were first presented before the Bengali public, they created an unprecedented wave of religious enthusiasm. The more orthodox-minded among the Bengalis, who had all along despised the theatre as immoral and irreligious, welcomed these performances as enthusiastically as the rest of the Bengali community. The most successful production was that of *Bilva Maṅgal Ṭhākur*.

In fact, it was Girīś Chandra's best work so far. The real clue to Girīś Chandra's enthusiasm for writing religious drama is to be found in a rather sudden spiritual turning in his own life.[1] At this period he was trying to express through the medium of his work the predominant tendency in his own life with all its moral and religious implications. But the most important feature of his religious drama is that it showed a decided advance on his earlier work in that he achieved an artistic unity through a clearer view, and a stronger and more persistent grasp of his material and its meaning. Truly speaking, Girīś Chandra's religious plays mark a definite point of achievement in his career. Such a hold on material and method, such a clear perception of the essentials of stage-craft gave good ground for expectation of greater things to follow.

For three years the " Star Theatre " had such a prosperous career that the management was making plans for buying new property at Hātībāgān for the purpose of building a larger and more up-to-date theatre. In the meantime, a new playhouse called the " Emerald Theatre " had been started in Calcutta by a wealthy Bengali, named Gopāl Lāl Śīl of Kaluṭolā. When the " Star Theatre " was under construction on its new premises, Girīś Chandra was asked by Gopāl Lāl Śīl to become the managing director of the " Emerald Theatre " with a bonus of twenty thousand rupees and a monthly salary of three hundred and sixty-one rupees. Girīś Chandra first hesitated, but afterwards reasoned that he had better go and give away a part of the proffered bonus money to his friends and colleagues of the " Star Theatre," which would be of great help to them for carrying out their new plans. Moreover, Gopāl Śīl threatened that if

[1] In his youth Girīś Chandra lost all faith in orthodox Hinduism. He turned to the Brāhma Samāj and went regularly to hear Keśab Chandra Sen and Maharṣi Debendra Nāth Tagore. But he was soon disillusioned by a lack of sincerity in the professed Brāhma doctrines and became almost an agnostic for some time. The presence of Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa Paramahaṃsa Deb (the holy man of Dakṣiṇesvar, whose disciples founded the Belur Maṭh, a Hindu monastic institution which propagates Vedanta philosophy and the ideal of social service and whose best-known representative is Swāmī Vivekānanda) at a performance of *Chaitanya Līlā* made a deep impression on Girīś Chandra's mind. From that time he became devoted to Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa, and his whole mental outlook was changed. In view of his actual career it is surprising to find how he came to be widely revered as a very religious person after his production of these religious plays.

Girīś Chandra did not come, he would bribe away all the members of the "Star Theatre" company and ruin their theatre. So Girīś Chandra finally accepted the offer, and gave sixteen thousand rupees out of his bonus of twenty thousand to the "Star Theatre." Without much delay, he wrote a new five-act drama entitled *Pūrṇa Chandra*, based on the tale of the Prince of Śiālkot. The scene of this play is laid in the Panjab. It was produced at the "Emerald Theatre" on the 6th Chaitra, 1294 B.S., i.e. 1888 A.D., and was a great success financially. Another new play of his, called *Biṣād* (Melancholy), a tragedy in five acts, had similar success. But Gopāl Lāl Śīl soon grew tired of his theatre and lent it to Mati Lāl Śūr and several members of the company. So ended Girīś Chandra's connection with the "Emerald Theatre." He came back to the "Star Theatre" and became its director once more. Here he produced his first social play *Praphulla* on the 15th Baiṣākh, 1295 B.S., i.e. 1889 A.D. This play marks another important point in the development of his play-writing. Previously in plays like *Bellik Bājār* he had only lightly touched on social questions. *Praphulla* showed the way in which his mind was then working, and it definitely marks him out as a dramatist with a complete command over whatever subject he chooses. The "Statesman" commented on the play in three consecutive issues and spoke highly of Girīś Chandra's acting as "Yogeś," the hero of the play.[1] After *Praphulla*, he wrote another social drama entitled *Hārā Nidhi* (The Lost Treasure), which was produced on the 30th Bhādra, 1295 B.S., i.e. 1889 A.D. An historical drama in four acts, called *Chaṇḍa*, was next performed on the 26th July, 1890. In Pouś, 1295 B.S., i.e. 1890 A.D., a patriotic play named *Māhā Pūjā* (The Grand Festival) was produced. It contained three scenes in which the characters are Britannia (strangely called "Britannica" by the author); the goddesses Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī; Mother India and her Sons and Daughters.

The sudden death of Girīś Chandra's two daughters and his second wife caused his temporary retirement from the stage. He went to Madhupur for a change with his youngest son, who

[1] See *Abhinetṛ-Kāhinī*, p. 38.

was very ill. After the death of this son, Girīś Chandra returned to Calcutta again, and at the suggestion of Nagendra Bhūṣaṇ Mukherji, established in 1892 a new theatre, styled the "Minerva Theatre." He translated Shakespeare's *Macbeth* into Bengali, which was the first play produced on this new stage. Girīś Chandra appeared in the rôle of "Macbeth." The "Englishman," while admitting that the idea of a Bengali Thane of Cawdor seemed somewhat incongruous, spoke of the performance as being quite in accordance with the conventions of the English stage.[1] As a matter of fact, the "Minerva Theatre" was the best equipped and most up-to-date of all the Bengali theatres in Calcutta at that time. Since the establishment of the "National Theatre" the methods of production of plays had considerably improved and a good deal of progress had been made not only in scenery and scenic requisites, but also in dressing, lighting and stage-architecture. Girīś Chandra employed an English artist to paint the scenery for *Macbeth*. He had the services of another Englishman, named Pym, as a decorative artist, who designed the costumes of the actors and actresses. A second performance of this Bengali version of *Macbeth* took place at the "Classic Theatre" a few months later before a distinguished gathering. The late Sir K. G. Gupta, Justices Sir Guru Dās Bannerji and Chandra Mādhab Ghoṣ, Mr. P. L. Ray, a well-known Calcutta barrister, and a host of other celebrities were present at this performance. The production of *Macbeth* at the "Minerva Theatre" was unfortunately a financial loss, which was, however, soon compensated for by the success of Girīś Chandra's new romantic musical comedy, *Abu Hosen*. The subsequent productions of Girīś Chandra's *Mukul-Munjarā*, a delightful comedy in five acts, on the 5th February, 1893, and of *Janā*, a Paurāṇic drama in five acts, in February of the following year, increased the income of the theatre. During 1894 and 1895, Girīś Chandra produced his three short farces, namely *Saptamīte Bisarjan* (The Interrupted Festival), *Baṛadiner Bakhśis* (The Christmas Box), *Sabhyatār Pāṇḍā* (A Tout for Civilization) and three musical dramas, viz., *Svapner Phul* (The Dream-Flower), consisting of only two scenes ;

[1] See *Abhinetṛ-Kāhinī*, p. 40.

Pāñch Kane (Five Brides), a light comedy in six scenes, and *Phaṇir Maṇi* (The Snake-Gem), a two-act play, based on a popular folk-tale, and first produced on the 25th December, 1895. The most ambitious of all of Girīś Chandra's productions at the "Minerva Theatre" during this period was that of his *Karameti Bāi*, an ethical and religious play in five acts, a new feature of which was the introduction of novel lighting and colour effects in several scenes. The scene of the "Six Seasons" in *Sabhyatār Pāṇḍā* was also made a very elaborate affair.

After the performance of *Karameti Bāi*, Girīś Chandra left the "Minerva Theatre" and again returned to the "Star Theatre" as its dramatic director. His coming was most opportune, for although this theatre possessed at that time a number of very good actors and actresses, it was badly in need of a leader who could guide them, and also of a writer who could supply them with suitable plays. Girīś Chandra successfully produced at this theatre his newly written semi-historical and semi-religious drama *Kālā Pāhāṛ* almost immediately. The play is based on the well-known story of a Hindu warrior, who after being converted to Muhammadanism, became more of an iconoclast than the most bigoted Muhammadan by birth. As a drama, strictly speaking, *Kālā Pāhāṛ* is not really in the best manner of Girīś Chandra, but his prestige as a dramatist was so overwhelming in those days that whatever came from his pen was without question generously received. Very few, if any, Bengali actors have ever dominated the stage as Girīś Chandra did at this period. His subsequent productions at the "Star Theatre" were *Pārasya Prasūn* (The Flower of Persia), a musical play in four acts, first staged on the 27th Bhādra, 1304 B.S., i.e. 1898 A.D.; a one-act patriotic drama called *Hīrak Jubilī* (The Diamond Jubilee), and a five-act social drama entitled *Māyābasān* (Disenchantment).

During the latter part of 1898, Girīś Chandra joined the "Classic Theatre," a comparatively new enterprise started by Amarendra Nāth Datta and there produced his *Deldār*, a short musical drama, and *Pāṇḍava-Gaurab* (The Glory of the Pāṇḍavas), a Paurāṇic play in verse with several prose comic scenes, the first performance of which took place on Saturday, the 6th Phālgun, 1306 B.S.,

i.e. 1899 A.D. He came back again to the "Minerva Theatre" for a short time and contributed to its repertoire his dramatized version of Baṅkim Chandra Chatterji's *Sītarām* and two other plays—*Maṇi Haraṇ* (The Stolen Jewel), written in two acts on the theme of Śrī Kṛṣṇa's atonement for his wrongs to Rādhā, first staged on the 7th Śrāban, 1307 B.S., i.e. 1901 A.D., and *Nanda Dulāl* (The Darling of Nanda), a three-act play in prose, dealing with Kṛṣṇa's boyhood. He returned to the "Classic Theatre" soon after, and there between 1901 and 1903, produced the following plays of his own composition: *Maner Matan* (The Heart's Desire), a joyous melodrama based on an Indian folk-tale; *Aśru-Dhārā* (The Flood of Tears), in commemoration of the death of Queen Victoria, performed on the 26th January, 1901; *Śānti* (Peace), dealing with the Boer War; *Abhiśāp* (The Curse), a musical drama on a Paurāṇic theme; *Bhrānti* (The Error), a five-act historical drama, depicting Mursid Kuli Khān's reign in Bengal; *Ayanā* (The Mirror), a short comedy the subject-matter of which is explained by its sub-title "sāmājik naksā" (a social sketch), and *Sat Nām* (Reputation), an historical play in five acts of which the scene is set in the time of Aurangzeb. The "Classic Theatre" after a brief but brilliant career showed signs of disintegration, due to reckless management. Girīś Chandra left it and joined the "Minerva Theatre" once again. From this time until his death, his connection with the "Minerva Theatre" was never really severed except for a short period at the "Kohinūr Theatre." The years between 1904 and 1912 at the "Minerva Theatre" were the most fruitful of his whole career. They brought him added distinction and greater recognition and gave him wider facilities for the expression of his mature art, both as an actor and playwright. He wrote and produced, produced and wrote with an amazing vitality and prolificness. The following is a list of his own dramas produced at the "Minerva Theatre" between 1904–12:—

Balidān (Sacrifice)—a tragedy dealing with the evils of the Bengali dowry-system. It was written at the suggestion of Justice Sārada Charaṇ Mitra and dedicated to him. It was first presented on the 26th Chaitra, 1311 B.S., or 1904 A.D.

Hara-Gourī—a mythological drama in two acts, representing Śiva and his spouse.

Sirājaddaulā—an historical drama, describing the life and character of Sirājaddaulā ; first performed on the 24th Bhādra, 1312 B.S., i.e. 1906 A.D. Girīś Chandra's son, Surendra Nāth Ghoṣ, popularly known as "Dānī Babu" appeared in the rôle of "Sirāj" and Tārā Sundarī as the "Begam of Āli Bardī Khān."

Mīr Kāsim—an historical play dealing with the career of Mīr Kāsim, a companion piece to *Sirājaddaulā*. It was first staged on the 2nd Āṣāṛ, 1313 B.S., i.e. 1907 A.D.

Śāsti Ki Śānti? (Punishment or Peace ?)—a social drama on the question of widow-marriage. The first performance took place on the 22nd Kārtik, 1315 B.S., i.e. 1909 A.D.

Śaṅkarāchāryya—a religious drama based on the life of Śrī Śaṅkarāchāryya, the famous Indian religious reformer. It was staged for the first time on the 2nd March, 1316 B.S., i.e. 1910 A.D., with "Dānī Babu" in the rôle of "Śaṅkar."

Aśoka—an historical drama dealing with the life and character of the Buddhist Emperor, Aśoka ; first produced on the 17th Agrahāyaṇ, 1317 B.S., i.e. 1911 A.D.

Tapobal (The Power of Penance)—a mythological play on the career of the Kṣatriya sage Visvāmitra ; dedicated to Sister Nivedita ; first staged on the 2nd Agrahāyaṇ, 1318 B.S., i.e. 1912 A.D.

We have briefly reviewed the later career of Girīś Chandra in connection with the various theatres which arose after the passing away of the "National Theatre." Almost every one of these theatres, as we have already noticed, owed its existence to the untiring activity of Girīś Chandra alone. But for his voluminous productions and new experiments and practical suggestions, none of them could have been maintained. Many of these theatres, notably the "Minerva" and the "Star" survive to-day and are still doing excellent work. It will be observed that the later development of the Bengali stage after the early days of aristocratic patronage, was entirely due to the ceaseless efforts of a few amateurs and a handful of amateur institutions. The modern professional stage of Bengal is nothing but the culmination of private enterprise through a series of experiments. It was only through individual initiative and enterprise, sacrifice and devotion that the modern Bengali

theatre was created; there were no big commercial magnates and no financial guilds to build it. The development of the Bengali professional stage finds interesting parallels in some of the famous European theatres of our times. The Moscow Art Theatre of Constantin Stanislavsky was founded and conducted by amateurs and it has gradually come to be one of the greatest theatres of the world.[1] The Theatre Guild of New York was first started as an amateur enterprise and has now grown into another great modern theatre. The Abbey Theatre in Dublin was inaugurated by amateurs and gradually developed through the devotion and zeal of persons like Synge, Lady Gregory, Mr. W. B. Yeats and Mr. Lennox Robinson. All over Europe and America to-day there are countless little amateur theatres which are providing for hundreds of playgoers. In England, small theatres under private enterprise are flourishing at Plymouth, Norwich, Newcastle-on-Tyne, Oxford, Cambridge and Hull, to mention only a few places. The Lena Ashwell Players are doing wonderful work, which already extends over a large number of London boroughs. The well-known Birmingham Repertory Theatre of Sir Barry V. Jackson bids fair to be one of the most successful theatrical companies in England. In his recent history of the Hammersmith "Lyric Theatre" Sir Nigel Playfair tells a wonderful tale of successful private enterprise and initiative.[2] Our brief survey of the "National Theatre" and its successors, therefore, only exhibits in Bengal precisely the same features and tendencies as have marked the evolution of theatrical enterprise in any country.

It would not be just to leave unmentioned the activities of some of the other actors and playwrights who worked either with Girīś Chandra or independently for the establishment and maintenance of the various theatres in Bengal. Girīś Chandra's old associates, Dharma Dās Śūr, Rādhā Mādhab Kar and Arddhendu Śekhar Mustaphī continued to collaborate with him

[1] For further information, see Stanislavsky, *My Life in Art;* Oliver M. Sayler, *The Russian Theatre,* chaps. ii–vi, pp. 13–94, and chap. xviii, pp. 287–97; and Huntly Carter, *The New Theatre and Cinema in Soviet Russia,* chap. v, pp. 45–9, and chap. xviii, pp. 192–216.

[2] See *The Story of the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith.*

at nearly all the different theatres he happened to be connected with at different times. Amṛta Lāl Basu, perhaps one of the greatest comedians the Bengali stage has ever produced, has written as voluminously and worked as assiduously for the cause of the theatre in Bengal as Girīś Chandra himself. Among his numerous productions, the best known are *Bābu* (The Fop), *Bibāha Bibhrāṭ* (The Marriage Dilemma), *Khās Dakhal* (Permanent Possession), *Naba Yauban* (New Youth), *Sābās Bāṅgālī* (Bravo Bengalis) and *Bāhabā Bātik* (Hurrah for Mania). Rām Nārāyaṇ had attacked Kulīnism and Girīś Chandra the dowry-system ; and Amṛta Lāl ruthlessly satirized new-fangled ideas of modern Bengal. His denunciations of the Brāhma Samāj, professional politicians, temperance workers, anglicized Bengalis and all self-appointed leaders of social reform are vehement and yet at the same time quite good-tempered and amusing. Even only a few months before he died, which happened about two years ago, he used to appear in some of his own plays before packed houses and make them ring with peals of laughter. One felt thankful that such a representative of the old school still survived to delight the younger generation. Amarendra Nāth Datta, in those days a rising actor and playwright, helped Girīś Chandra in the production of various plays at the "Classic Theatre." Apareś Chandra Mukherji, another actor who is still living, worked with Girīś Chandra and showed great promise of becoming a capable stage-director—a promise which he has since amply fulfilled. Girīś Chandra's son "Dānī Babu" was perhaps the most promising of the younger actors. In the beginning, Girīś Chandra was very much opposed to his joining a professional stage, but could not keep him away from it for long. "Dānī Babu" received most of his early training from Amṛta Lāl Mitra, a friend and colleague of Girīś Chandra. Before joining any of the existing public theatres, he took part in various amateur theatrical performances in and outside Calcutta. At the request of Amṛta Lāl Mukherji, he was allowed by his father to act for some time at the "Star Theatre." He achieved great success in the rôle of "Viṣṇu" in *Dakṣa Yajna* and that of "Raghu Deb" in *Chaṇḍa*. Soon after, he joined Amṛta Lāl

Mukherji, Nīl Mādhab Chakravartī and several others who seceded from the "Star Theatre" and started a new theatre called the "City Theatre." This company took possession of the building formerly occupied by the "Bīṇa Theatre," which having been established about 1888 by the well-known poet and dramatist Rāj Kṛṣṇa Rāy independently of Girīś Chandra's help, had existed only for a couple of years. After the "Minerva Theatre" was established by Girīś Chandra in 1892, "Dānī Babu" joined his father and began to receive serious coaching from the latter. In the rôles of "Prabīr" in *Janā* and that of "Malcolm" in *Macbeth*, he showed real distinction and was soon acclaimed as the worthy son of a distinguished father. His talents received full opportunity in all the plays of Girīś Chandra, produced at the "Minerva Theatre" between 1904–12. After the death of his father, he became the managing director of this theatre.

Some of the actresses of the time of Girīś Chandra also deserve to be mentioned. We noticed that in 1873 women were admitted to the Bengali stage by the organizers of the "Bengali Theatre." Among the four women who appeared here in the production of *Śarmiṣṭhā*, Sukumārī Datta *alias* Golāp Sundarī was by far the best. Her first notable acting was as "Bimalā" in Bihārī Lāl Chatterji's dramatized production of Baṅkim Chandra's *Durgeś Nandinī*. Sukumārī's charming personality and great wit were more fully revealed in some of the comedies which were performed later at the "Bengal Theatre." In Mahārājā Yatīndra Mohan Tagore's version of *Vidyā-Sundar* produced on the 14th March, 1874, Sukumārī appeared in the rôle of "Mālinī." Afterwards, when Jyotirindra Nāth Tagore's heroic drama *Puru Vikram* was staged, her acting of "Queen Ailabāla" in the play was its greatest attraction. Sukumārī joined the "Great National Theatre" as soon as it began to employ actresses, following the fashion already started. There she received a very thorough training from Arddhendu Śekhar Mustaphī. *Śarat-Sarojinī*, a sensational play from the pen of the director Upendra Nāth Dās, was produced at this theatre on the 2nd January, 1875 and Sukumārī gave an excellent rendering of the rôle of the heroine. Later she appeared in the principal female rôles successively in *Kumār Samvava* (The Birth of the

Prince) of Hari Bhūṣaṇ Chatterji, Baṅkim Chandra's *Ānanda Maṭh* (The Temple of Bliss) and Rabīndra Nāth Tagore's *Rājā Basanta Rāy*. Afterwards, when she came to the "Emerald Theatre" to be associated with Girīś Chandra, Sukumārī attained the highest point of her career. Here she successfully played the part of the heroine in several of Baṅkim Chandra's dramatic works. The last years of her life on the stage were spent at the "Classic Theatre," where she collaborated with Amarendra Nāth Datta in many important plays.

But the most brilliant and eventful career among all the Bengali actresses of this period is that of Tārā Sundarī. Tārā joined the stage as a girl of seven. She made her *début* in the rôle of a boy in *Chaitanya Līlā* at the "Star Theatre." For about two years after this performance she had no connection with the stage. When the "Star Theatre" opened its new premises at Hātībāgān, Tārā joined the company at the request of Nīl Mādhab Chakrabartī. In the opening performance of Girīś Chandra's *Nasī Rām*, Tārā appeared as a "Bhīl-boy." Next she took the rôle of "Kāminī," the daughter of the hero of *Svarṇalatā*, dramatized and produced by Amṛta Lāl Basu at this theatre. The coach, Amṛta Lāl Mitra, was very much impressed with young Tārā's elocution, charming voice and general cleverness. In later performances at the "Star Theatre," Tārā was entrusted with more important parts. Girīś Chandra and Amṛta Lāl Basu gave her the necessary coaching. Tārā learned to sing and took regular lessons from the dancing and musical director, Kāsī Nāth Chatterji. In Girīś Chandra's musical drama, *Malinā Bikāś*, Tārā gave a very successful performance of a dancing girl. Shortly after, when Mānadā Dāsī and several other leading actresses left the "Star" company, Tārā was entrusted with some of the important parts which they had formerly taken. Though only a girl of thirteen, Tārā showed unusual aptitude for the stage. Tārā achieved her first notable success as a singer in Amṛta Lāl Basu's *Bilāp* (Lamentation), written to commemorate the death of Paṇḍit Īśvar Chandra Vidyāsāgar. Her first really great success as an actress was in the rôle of "Śaibalinī" in the dramatized production of Baṅkim Chandra Chatterji's *Chandra Śekhar*.

For several years after this performance Tārā dissociated herself from the stage except for a two-night appearance in the rôle of "Karameti Bāi" at the "Minerva Theatre," at the special request of Girīś Chandra. Later she joined the "Indian Dramatic Club," started by Amarendra Nāth Datta, and took part in the production of *Palāśīr Yuddha*, when this play was presented by the club at the "Emerald Theatre." She also appeared in Girīś Chandra's *Biṣād*, later performed by this club at the "Bengal Theatre." She next joined the "City Theatre" and gave a successful performance of "Devī" in the dramatized production of Baṅkim Chandra's *Devī Chaudhurāṇī*. About this time Amarendra Nāth Datta founded the "Classic Theatre" which Tārā joined. The most noteworthy of her performances here were as "Śrīlekhā" in *Hari Rāj* and as "Devī" again in *Devī Chaudhurāṇī*. Soon afterwards, Tārā joined the "Star Theatre" again, and collaborated with Girīś Chandra in most of his own plays. Tārā had by this time established her reputation as the leading Bengali actress. She returned to the "Classic Theatre" for some time and appeared in the rôles of "Kaikeyī" and "Golendām" in *Rām Banabās* and *Maner Matan* respectively. In the meantime, a new theatre called the "Aurora Theatre" was started and financed by Guru Prasād Mitra under the managing directorship of Nīl Mādhab Chakrabartī. Tārā appeared in the rôle of "Mokṣadā" in a social play entitled *Kāl Pariṇay* (The Unlucky Marriage), written by Rām Lāl Bannerji and produced at this theatre. Some time after Arddhendu Śekhar Mustaphī joined the "Aurora Theatre" and coached Tārā for the title part of *Rijiyā*. But the "Aurora Theatre" soon changed hands and assumed the name of "Unique Theatre." Tārā's last performance here was that of "Mandār Mālā" in *Ratnamālā*. She joined the "Minerva" company and appeared as the heroine of every play produced by it, until she went to the "Kohinūr Theatre" which she left to join the "Bāṇī Theatre." After many wanderings she returned to the "Minerva Theatre" once more. In fact, the story of her life is largely the story of the Bengali stage during this period. She is, no doubt, regarded to-day as an actress of the old school, rather

sentimental and declamatory, but whoever has seen her, even in her older days, as "Jaharā" in Girīś Chandra's *Śirājaddaulā* or "Yośībāi" in Dvijendra Lāl Rāy's *Raṇā Pratāp*, or in the name part of Kṣīrod Prasād Vidyābinod's *Chāṁd-Bibi*, could not but be impressed by the intense vitality and originality of her acting. In fact, she overlooked nothing in the way of voice, gesture and carriage. She was far and away .the most popular of all the actresses of her time, and if one makes due allowances for the different circumstances which won her distinction, her career can fairly be compared to that of Sarah Bernhardt or Eleanora Duse. Some of her best known contemporaries such as Binodinī Dāsī, Tinkarī, Suśīlā Bālā, Narī Sundarī and Kusum Kumarī will almost certainly be overshadowed some day by the appearance of actresses, superior in technique and more modern in method, but Tārā Sundarī will always be remembered as the first great actress of the modern Bengali stage.

CHAPTER XXII

The Art and Practice of Girīś Chandra Ghoṣ

Like Shakespeare and Molière, Girīś Chandra Ghoṣ belongs to that very sensitive type of theatrical worker called "player" and is also one of the few great "players" who have won distinction in the field of serious scholarship. We have already noticed what a voluminous and prolific writer he was. He was the author of about seventy works which cover a very wide area. He used to dictate the words of his play to an amanuensis. Most of the plays produced at the "Great National Theatre" and the "Star Theatre" were dictated to and written down by either Amṛta Lāl Basu, Amṛta Lāl Mitra or Debendra Nāth Basu. At times, he spoke so rapidly that they were hard put to it to keep pace with him. During the last fifteen years of his life, Mr. Abināś Chandra Gāṅgulī acted as his amanuensis. Mr. Gāṅgulī has recently brought out several hitherto unpublished plays of Girīś Chandra.[1]

Girīś Chandra did not always write with his eye upon the stage. He was quite often indifferent to the technical demands of the theatre and was more interested in the mood of the moment. He is an emotional playwright par excellence. He touches every mood—of graceful and exuberant sentiment in his poetic plays, rich and delicate fantasy in his musical dramas, philosophical meditation and devotional fervour in his religious plays, poignant emotion in his social dramas and patriotic feeling in his historical plays. But he has trusted to his temperament to a dangerous degree. It is rather curious to find that being such an able stage-director himself, he should in many of his plays have made the task of a theatrical producer so difficult. His *Śaṅkarāchāryya* is a case in point; some of its scenes are quite incapable of being staged and this is more or less true of most of his long historical dramas. His fidelity to historical facts, his accuracy in character-drawing and above

[1] See *Rūp O Raṅga*, Nos. 2, 4, 5 and 6, 1331 B.S., i.e. 1924–5 A.D.

all, his style in these plays are above reproach. But somehow, the plays themselves fall far short of the demands of the stage. Great writing may be desirable in a drama, but it is not the only requisite ; at least as important is the securing of a proper co-ordination of its principal elements. If the truth has to be told, Girīś Chandra at times shows quite an imperfect sense of the stage, and in consequence, the admitted excellences of his style tend to be dissipated before the footlights. True, his plays are extremely interesting to read, but that is not the real test of a play. The main question to ask about a play is : " Does it act smoothly and effectively ? " If a play is successfully to endure the ordeal of production, it must be quite free from those little awkwardnesses of movement and speech which so often escape the notice of a reader, charmed by its literary quality, but obtrude themselves so painfully upon an audience. The gift of writing always came naturally to Girīś Chandra, but his temperament sometimes obscured his imagination. He had the facts all arranged before him and he had also a keen sense of reality, but in spite of this, he seemed to lose himself in a kind of dream. When this mood is upon him, his characters also tend to become completely oblivious to their environment and to lose touch with the actual situation and to move in a world apart. In fact, this seems to be one of the distinguishing characteristics of his work.

Another marked instance of Girīś Chandra's indifference to the requirements of the stage is his excessive fondness for introducing songs and comic interludes. No doubt, he intended them as a " relief," but they very seldom actually served this purpose. We may take as an illustration the songs of " Jobī " in *Balidān*. " Jobī " is a crazy girl who goes about singing songs throughout the play. She is a rather unusual type of character, very eccentric, and does not fit in at all with the rest of the plot. The drama is a tragedy with a grim ending, involving the wreck of many lives ; nowhere does there seem to be any room for the mad outbursts of a girl, who is quite unrelated to the tragedy itself. Moreover, the songs are on thoroughly irrelevant topics and written in language neither elegant nor chaste. As another illustration of this defect we may mention

the character of "Madan Ghoṣ" in *Praphulla*. By means of this character, Girīś Chandra introduces an absolutely opposite and irrational kind of humour and foolery, which are hardly in keeping with the intense tragic passions aroused by the play as a whole. A tragedy has every legitimate right to take recourse to "relief" but the "relief" must be essentially of a nature which harmonizes with, not contradicts, which softens, not hardens, and which tones down, and not merely lets loose an opposite set of emotions. Take again Girīś Chandra's frequent use of the "Saṅ," which, as a rule, belongs to the Yātrā proper. A serious religious play like *Pralhād Charit* is utterly ruined by a pair of scoundrels who dance and make distasteful jokes. In *Pūrṇa Chandra*, he introduces a character called "Dāmodar" (a disciple of a certain holy man named Gorakṣa Nāth), who dresses himself as a monkey, wags his tail and dances to the music of two respectable ladies in the play. The conventional farcial episodes of low-life in the regular Yātrā appear under slightly different names in *Ābu Hosen* and *Janā*. Nobody should have any particular objection to the use of such comic interludes in a serious play, but they must not on any account be employed with a total indifference to the requirements of its proper representation on the stage. Apart from these limitations, which were more or less inherent in the condition of the Bengali stage of those days, Girīś Chandra's greatness as a playwright is unquestionable. If we accept Dr. Brander Matthews' contention that "the great dramatist of a period when drama has flourished has always produced his plays for performance in the theatre of his own time by the actors of his own time, and for the spectators of his own time," [1] Girīś Chandra Ghoṣ can with perfect justice be acclaimed as a really great dramatist.

Topobal (The Power of Penance), which was Girīś Chandra's last work, may be taken as the best representative of his Paurāṇic plays. It is more original and relies a great deal less for its language and style upon the sources from which the story is derived than most of his earlier dramas of this class. The hero of the play is a famous figure in Indian mythology—Viśvāmitra,

[1] See *North American Review*, 1908, vol. clxxxvii, pp. 213–14.

a Kṣatriya king who took recourse to austerities with a view to gaining recognition as a Brāhmaṇ. The theme is his life-long conflict with Vaśiṣṭha, a Brāhmaṇ. *Balidān* (Sacrifice) is admittedly the best of Girīś Chandra's social plays, and in literary power and tragic intensity of emotion, it is not surpassed by any of his plays. It has that kind of startling realism in which Girīś Chandra at his best excels all modern dramatists. With sureness of touch and wealth of feeling he describes the tragic happenings to Karuṇāmay Basu, who, in his efforts to get his three daughters married, is completely ruined because of the Hindu dowry-system. *Bilva Maṅgal Ṭhākur* (The Brāhmaṇ Bilva Maṅgal) is decidedly the best of Girīś Chandra's religious plays and is one of the few such plays in which the plot is entirely his own invention. It tells the story of a Brāhmaṇ youth, Bilva Maṅgal and his passionate love for a courtesan, Chintāmaṇi, and his later spiritual transformation through a series of most painful physical and mental trials, after which he finally becomes a lover of Kṛṣṇa and of everything pure and holy. The play is written with great vigour and dramatic power. It owes its appeal to the fact that it depicts in a striking manner the eternal conflict between the carnal and the spiritual, which in some measure is the lot of all men. *Bilva Maṅgal Ṭhākur* is also enriched by some of the best pieces of dialogue that the dramatist ever wrote. Among his numerous historical dramas, *Mīr Kāsim* ranks highest. It is a very vividly stirring picture of the last glory of the Muhammadan Empire, and the first struggles of the English for supremacy in Bengal. It is extremely courageous and frank in its presentment of facts which, if we may judge from statements of impartial historians, are not in the least exaggerated.[1] The performance of the play is forbidden by the Government, but it is still available in print. The setting of the play is on a grand scale. We have Mir Jāfar, the Nawab of Bengal, with his son-in-law, Mīr Kāsim, and Sāha

[1] In his *Decisive Battles of India*, Colonel Malleson wrote: "The annals of no nation contain records of conduct more unworthy, more mean than that which characterized the English Government of Calcutta during the three years which followed the removal of Mir Jāfar. That conduct is attributable to one cause, the basest and meanest of all, the desire for professional gain by any means and at any cost." See Preface to *Mīr Kāsim*.

Ālam, the Emperor of Delhi; we have also the Hindu heroes Jagat Śeṭh, Svarūp Chāṅd and their allies; we have on the English side, Vansittart, Holwell and Warren Hastings, and we have also a French General, and some Armenian soldiers and merchants. Girīś Chandra showed a remarkable command over his subject-matter, which he compressed into a thrilling tale of heroism, intrigue and romance. Among his various musical dramas, *Ābu Hosen* is unquestionably the best and most characteristic. It is a light comedy about a charming youth of Baghdad, named Ābu Hosen, and his amorous adventures with Rosenā, the beautiful daughter of the Khalif, Hārun-Al-Rasid of *Arabian Nights* fame. It is a delightful work, fancifully humorous and full of melodious music and dancing. Girīś Chandra was a song-writer of very exceptional quality. Some of his songs are joyous and light-hearted and others are tenderly pathetic, but all are beautiful. Baṅkim Chandra Chatterji highly praised his songs in *Māyā Taru*, and Nabīn Chandra Sen was very much moved by the songs of the girl-companions of Kṛṣṇa and Rādhā in *Pāṇḍava-Gaurab*.[1]

Girīś Chandra has often been described as the Garrick of the Bengali stage. Such a description is true only in the sense that each of these actors in their life-time held undisputed sway over the world of the theatre. There is nothing to show, however, that the methods of the two actors were at all similar. In fact, those who compared Birīś Chandra to Garrick had perhaps never seen Garrick on a public stage, and only desired to connect Girīś Chandra with the name of the best English actor of those days. Girīś Chandra is, no doubt, the first great actor that the modern Bengali stage has produced. He introduced an entirely new style of acting. He was possessed with a strong imaginative insight which enabled him to grasp the physical and psychological features of the character he impersonated. He studied his rôles carefully and thoroughly, and it often happened that he even gave an entirely different interpretation of a part from that intended by the author, by projecting into it his own personality. In his own article entitled "Play and

[1] See Preface to *Girīś Gītābalī*, edited by Abināś Chandra Gāṅgulī.

the Player" [1] Girīś Chandra defends this method. He points out that no particular actor's interpretation of a character ought to be regarded as final. The same part, he asserts, is capable of being rendered in different ways by different actors at different times, and each may attain an equal degree of excellence. He lays great stress on natural and free movement upon the stage. He himself possessed extreme freedom of movement and elasticity in carriage, and whatever the intrinsic merit of his own interpretation of a certain character, it was always characterized by natural grace and lack of self-consciousness. He was also endowed with all the physical qualities of a good actor. He had an imposing appearance and good looks, which well suited him for heroic parts. In the article mentioned above, he lays emphasis also on the natural possession by actors and actresses of a healthy and graceful appearance. While admitting the uses of make-up, he holds that an actor or actress must be naturally fitted for the part he or she is to impersonate. His method of acting was essentially realistic in theory, but in actual practice he often transgressed his own fundamental principles. His emotional sensibility was at times so strong that he would be carried away by a wave of enthusiasm which really spoiled the artistic value of his acting. He was a very extraordinary mixture of opposites, his strong sense of realism was accompanied by an equally strong tendency to religious mysticism, and these two elements did not always agree. He was possessed of a good voice, deep, sonorous, well-cultivated, and capable of expressing the minutest shades of emotion. His intonation and elocution were on the whole admirable, but it must be admitted that at times his delivery tended to become drawling, long-drawn-out, monotonous and lacking in colour. His style was almost universally imitated by his contemporaries, often with the most unnatural and ludicrous effect. His real greatness as an actor was due mainly to the combination of two characteristics. In the first place, he was so constituted that his inner emotions, even the subtlest of them, were immediately and exactly reflected in his facial

[1] See Girīś Chandra's *Collected Works* (Published by Upendra Nāth Mukherji, Calcutta, 1910), part V, pp. 187 ff.

expression. In the second place, he was never content with merely acting a part, and simulating in outward gestures emotions appropriate to it, but insisted on living it. He could not be satisfied until he had got inside the skin of the character to be represented. Many lesser actors have had one or other of these gifts ; it was the possession of both that gave Girīś Chandra his wonderful power upon the stage.

Girīś Chandra's reputation as a producer in his own time far outshone his reputation as an actor, but with the passing of years the case has been rather reversed. From the modern point of view, he cannot be regarded as a very successful producer. The art of producing and even the proper function of a stage-director, as we understand it to-day, were unknown in Bengal in the days of Girīś Chandra. His own towering personality as a single great actor, and his ungenerous impatience of the production of plays other than his own, prevented him from attaining any degree of real perfection in the art of producing. Not one of the great plays produced by him can be said to have been finished in all its parts, and the minor characters were almost always sacrificed for the principal ones. Girīś Chandra, as a producer, ignored the simple fact that the mere individual acting, however great, is not in itself sufficient to secure the success of a play on the modern stage. A few purple patches may be quite useful, but the neglect of the minor characters and the infinite number of small details pertaining to a stage production must invariably lead to a lack of artistic unity and finish. Notwithstanding these defects, which were more or less inherent in the condition of the theatre of that time, the actual contribution of Girīś Chandra to the development of the Bengali drama and stage is inestimable. Girīś Chandra Ghoṣ has to be recognized not merely as a name in the dramatic history of Bengal but the presiding genius of a distinct period. In spite of the rivalries and personal jealousies between the different theatres of his own day, it was Girīś Chandra who brought order and discipline out of chaos, and steadfastly upheld the dignity of the stage. Representing as he does the greatness and defects of his own age, he so far transcends his contemporaries as to speak with an even great compelling power

to us to-day than to his own generation. His personal magnetism and his wonderful ability as an organizer, aided by his outstanding merits as an actor and playwright, steered the rising Bengali theatre safely through one of the stormiest periods of its history. Those who came before him had seen only a vision of the birth of the new drama in Bengal. It was Girīś Chandra who brought this vision to fruition by the hard, patient labour of years. For upwards of two decades from the time when he became producer on his own account, Girīś Chandra Ghoṣ was responsible for all the changes and new lines of activity which contributed to the establishment of the drama as an art in Bengal.

DVIJENDRA LĀL RĀY AND HIS TIMES

CHAPTER XXIII

The Svadeśī Āndolan

The first appearance of Dvijendra Lāl Rāy as a dramatist synchronizes with the beginning of the *Svadeśī Āndolan* or Nationalist Movement.[1] A true understanding of the work of this writer is not possible without a clear view of the place of that movement in Bengali life and thought. To a superficial observer the movement would appear to be the direct outcome of Lord Curzon's measure for the partition of Bengal in 1905. But, as a matter of fact, this was the occasion rather than the cause of the movement and all that it connoted. No doubt, the measure itself stirred Bengal to an unprecedented political and economic unrest, as it was interpreted as a challenge to Bengali manhood, and as a deliberate attempt by the British Government to break the solidarity of Bengali life and spirit; but the new national consciousness which reacted so dramatically in 1905 was the product of a large number of forces which had been in operation for many years before. As we have already pointed out in an earlier chapter, English education and the study of Western science, philosophy and literature had, during the course of the nineteenth century, brought about a literary renaissance. The renaissance had produced profound effects

[1] For fuller details, see *Svadeśī Āndolan* (An inquiry into the nature of the Svadeśī agitation in Bengal), Calcutta, 1906; *Svadeśī Brata* (A short statement of the aims of the Society for the promotion of the Svadeśī Movement), Calcutta, 1906; *Svadeśī Tattva* (A collection of Svadeśī songs, with extracts from essays by Bhūdeb Mukherji, and a list of places where native manufactured articles can be obtained), Calcutta, 1906; *Svadeśī Samaj* (An article on village self-government, reprinted from *Baṅga Darśan*) by Rabīndra Nāth Tagore; *Svadeś-Sebak* (An article on self-government in Bengal, reprinted from *Nabya Bharat*) by Binay Kumār Sarkār, Calcutta, 1907; also see Sir Verney Lovett, *A History of the Indian Nationalist Movement* (1905–19), New York, 1920; Binayak Savarkar, *The War of Indian Independence*, London, 1909, and *Freiheitskampf der indischen Nationalisten*, Berlin, 1920.

not only in the domain of literature but in all departments of Bengali life and thought. Perhaps in no connection was the new influence more strikingly manifested than in the remarkable re-adjustment of political ideas which it necessitated. It was inevitable that young Bengalis, who had placed in their hands as text-books the political writings of John Stuart Mill, the speeches of Burke, the poems of Shelley, the prose and poetry of Milton and the writings of Carlyle and Ruskin, should develop an attitude to political problems, very different from the inertia which had hitherto characterized their countrymen. For a long time Bengal had been out of touch with the current of world-history and now suddenly awoke to a conception of its own destiny in relation to other nations of the world. And so Western education which seemed at first to threaten to sweep away everything Indian, eventually came to have precisely the opposite effect, and by bringing Bengalis face to face with the facts of world-history, compelled them to reconsider the achievements of their own past and awakened in them a yearning for the revival of the ancient glories of the Hindu race. The French Revolution with all the new ideas it inspired, as reflected in the Romantic Movement and in the writings of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Southey and Scott, was bound to fill the atmosphere of Bengal with new and even extravagant national aspirations. The European nationalism of the nineteenth century appealed to Bengalis with all the charm of novelty, and with all the greater force because of their inexperience. The lives of the famous patriots and heroes of European history, such as Mazzini, Garibaldi, Kossuth and Cavour, naturally turned their minds to the memory of their great leaders and heroes in olden times. Though it is not easy to fix a date for the actual commencement of the new national consciousness, the time of Rājā Rām Mohan Rāy and the Governor-Generalship of Lord William Bentinck may be taken as the approximate starting-point.

Rājā Rām Mohan Rāy staunchly supported the cause of the revival of ancient Hindu culture in its more spiritual aspects. He stood against the prevalent tide of unmeaning imitation of Western institutions. He thought it desirable to attempt a synthesis of whatever was best in the life and thought of

both India and Europe. Then came Maharṣi Debendra Nāth Tagore, the father of the poet Rabīndra Nāth Tagore, with his movement for social and religious reform. Through the columns of his *Tattva-bodhinī Patrikā* (A Journal for the Understanding of Truth), week after week, he laid before his countrymen a programme of social re-construction and moral regeneration on spiritual lines. With his financial assistance and under his guidance Naba Gopāl Mitra founded a journal called the *National Paper*. But Naba Gopāl's activities were not confined merely to journalism. In 1865, he organized a Svadeśī Melā (An Exhibition of indigenous products of Bengal), perhaps one of the very first of its kind, which proved a great stimulus to the dying cottage-industries. About the same time Rāj Nārāyaṇ Basu published a pamphlet advocating the establishment of a society for "the promotion of national glory" (Jātiya Gaurab-Sañchārinī Sabhā). In it he impressed his countrymen with the immediate need of reviving the ancient Hindu sciences of gymnastics, archæology and history, and adopting the Bengali language as the medium of instruction and conversation among educated Bengalis. This society did valuable work for a number of years. In 1871 or 1872, Rāj Nārāyaṇ delivered an address on the "Superiority of Hindu Religion" (Hindu Dharmer Śreṣṭhatā) at a meeting organized by the Calcutta nationalists. His address was printed and widely circulated. Among other men of outstanding personality and character who influenced Bengali life and thought of the nineteenth century, the names of Keśab Chandra Sen, the religious reformer, Paṇḍit Īśvar Chandra Vidyāsāgār, the distinguished educationist and social reformer, and Baṅkim Chandra Chatterji and Bhūdeb Mukherji, the two literary giants, are certainly the most noteworthy. The "Indian Association" was formed in Calcutta in 1881 by prominent educated Bengalis to organize and promote political reform on constitutional lines. The leaders of this association soon conceived the desire for the establishment of a National Congress. The late Sir Surendra Nāth Bannerji wrote in the *Bengalee* of the 27th May, 1882, strongly advocating such a project. In 1883, a conference of leaders from all parts of India was held in Calcutta, and with the encouragement and

sympathy of Mr. Allan O. Hume and other distinguished Englishmen, the foundations of the Indian National Congress were laid.[1] Swami Vivekānanda wrote and lectured on the problems of national regeneration and devoted his efforts especially to the cause of uplifting the poor and depressed classes. His writings and speeches were characterized throughout by a strong spiritual fervour and moral courage, and made a tremendous appeal to the imagination of the youths of his time. His message reached as far as America in the *Chicago Conference of World Religions*.

At the close of 1904, a strong impulse was given to the nationalist movement by the Russo-Japanese war. "Even the remote villagers," Mr. C. F. Andrews relates, "talked over the victories of Japan as they sat in their circles and passed round the 'hukka' (i.e. the Indian pipe) at night. One of the older men said to me, 'There has been nothing like this since the Mutiny.'"[2] It was natural for the people of India to look upon the Japanese victory from a purely Oriental standpoint. They felt that the past glory and greatness of Asia were just beginning to return, and the days of servitude to the European races were over. The announcement in the latter part of 1904 of the project for the partition of Bengal came as a direct challenge to the pent-up nationalistic enthusiasm which had been developing all these years, and provided it with a definite objective and programme. The *Svadeśī Āndolan* swept over Bengal like a flood and produced a political upheaval quite unparalleled in its annals. The main immediate object which the promoters of the *Svadeśī Āndolan* set before themselves was the boycott of foreign goods and more particularly British manufactured articles by way of protest against the partition. A resolution setting forth the aims of the movement was proposed by the late Sir Surendra Nāth

[1] For further particulars, see *The India National Congress* (containing an account of its origin and growth, full texts of Presidential addresses and reprints of all the Congress resolutions), G. A. Natesan & Co., Madras, 1909; *The Indian National Congress*, its origin, history, constitution and objects, National Press, Madras, 1888; Sir Henry Cotton, *New India or India in Transition*, revised and enlarged ed., London (Kegan Paul & Co.), 1907; Sir Surendra Nāth Bannerji, *A Nation in Making* (being the reminiscences of fifty years of public life), London, 1925; Bipin Chandra Pāl, *Indian Nationalism —Its Principles and Personalities*, Triplicane, 1919.

[2] *The Renaissance in India*, p. 1.

Bannerji at a monster public meeting held in the Calcutta Town Hall in August, 1905, and passed unanimously. Political conferences, mass meetings, public processions and demonstrations were held in all principal towns and villages of Bengal to spread the cult of Svadeśī. The acute economic distress and the backwardness of the country in education and industrial development further accentuated the political situation. The immediate object (viz., the boycott of British goods) was only partially achieved. But the most important result of the movement was that it roused Bengal as a whole to a national self-consciousness which was to produce, later, effects such as could not have been foreseen by the keenest political prophets.

CHAPTER XXIV

Nationalism in Literature and Drama

The political events that preceded the Svadeśī movement would in themselves have been wholly insufficient to bring about the new nationalistic consciousness if they had not been reinforced by a growing tendency towards the literary expression of patriotic ideals and sentiments. In one of his poems the poet Īśvar Chandra Gupta asserted that he preferred a dog of his own country to a foreign master. Raṅga Lāl Bannerji exhorted his countrymen, saying: "Who would live without independence? Who would willingly wear the fetters of slavery?" Michael Madhu Sūdan Datta, though an ardent enthusiast for Western culture, sounded the note of nationalism in his well-known Sonnet on the glories of the Bengali Language. In *Meghnādbadh Kāvya* he makes Rāvaṇa address these words to his son killed in battle: "The bed on which you lie, my son, is that which heroes and martyrs covet most. Who would fear to face death in defence of his Motherland? He who fears is a foolish coward; shame, shame on him a thousand-fold!" The dramatist Mano Mohan Basu emphasized the economic slavery of India caused by alien rule in the following verse: "Day after day India becomes poor, because she is in bondage." Hem Chandra Bannerji has for the theme of his epic, *Bṛtra Saṁhār*, the war waged by the gods of heaven to recover their birth-right from the Titans. The character of the sage Dadhichi in the epic, who gives up his bones to be wrought into the weapon of liberation, is held up as a model of self-sacrifice by means of which alone liberty can be gained for the motherland. Hem Chandra's *Bhārat Saṁgīt* (A Song of India) is a clarion call to the peoples of India to arise and awake, "seeing that in this wide world every country is awake; India alone sleeps." In Nabīn Chandra Sen's *Ārya Darśan* we get a history of the struggles of the non-Aryan inhabitants of India

to come to their own by overthrowing the domination of the Aryan invaders. His famous tetralogy of epics, *Raibatak*, *Kurukṣetra*, *Prabhās* and *Palāśīr Yuddha* are all marked by an ardent love of the motherland.

The novelists no less than the poets of Bengal have spoken the language of patriotism. Bańkim Chandra Chatterji's *Ānanda Maṭh* (The Temple of Bliss)[1] may be regarded as the most distinctly patriotic type of Bengali fiction, both in its theme and treatment. Dr. Nareś Chandra Sen Gupta, who has translated this work into English, describes the story as "a parable of patriotism," and says that the author "perceived that the strongest sentiment of the Indian, as well as the most prominent element in Eastern civilization is the religious sentiment," and he was, therefore, led "not only to imbue patriotic sentiments with religion but also to conceive nationality itself under the category of religion." "The essence of the story," according to Lord Ronaldshay, "is a Hindu revival, necessitating the overthrow of the enemies of Hinduism, which was to be achieved by a body of men pledged by solemn vows to the service of the motherland."[2] Thus the picture is presented to us of a band of selfless youths who having renounced the world not for spiritual gain but to deliver their country from the yoke of the Mogul rulers, had taken up arms to defend the helpless and weak. They call themselves the "Children of Mother India" and chant a hymn to the Motherland which contains the refrain "Bande Mātaram" (I Salute Thee, Mother !). A well-known stanza runs as follows :—

Hail Mother !
Hail to Thee !
Thou art my Muse, Thyself my religion,
Thou art my heart and life.
Thou art the strength of my limbs.

[1] In his recent book, *The Heart of Āryāvarta*, the Earl of Ronaldshay gives a very illuminating study of *Ánanda Maṭh*, and points out its significance in the psychology of the Indian unrest. While admitting that Bańkim Chandra intended in this work only to elucidate the fact that the English have saved Bengal from anarchy, Lord Ronaldshay considers it "a curious irony of fate that it should have been upon this very book that the revolutionaries should have drawn so deeply." See pp. 103–16.

[2] *The Heart of Āryāvarta*, pp. 113–14.

My heart's devotion thou art.
O Mother! Thy image I build
In all the temples of my land.

In another novel, *Sītā Rām*, Baṅkim Chandra gives a most thrilling account of the fight of a heroic Bengali zemindar with the Mogul rulers. In it he introduces as emblems of Hindu Moslem re-union two minor characters—Chandra Chūṛ, the spiritual preceptor of Sītā Rām, and a Muhammadan fakir. His *Devī Choudhurāṇī*, though not written directly to propagate nationalism, contains the inspiring character of Bhabānī Pāṭhak, who is held up as an ideal patriot. Rameś Chandra Datta, the brilliant Indian civilian and historian, wrote *Rājput Jīban Sandhyā* (The Even-Tide of Rājput History) and its sequel, *Mahārāṣṭra Jīban-Prabhāt* (The Dawn of the Mahratta Race), which deal with two of the most thrilling episodes of Indian history, calculated to appeal to national pride and glory. He was not satisfied with presenting merely the heroic deeds of the Rājput and Mahratta leaders such as Rāṇā Pratāp Siṁha and Śivaji, but to show that the Bengali race is not a race of cowards, he also portrayed the chivalrous characters of two young Bengali zemindars in his two well-known novels, *Baṅga Bijetā* (The Conqueror of Bengal) and *Madhavī Kaṅkan*.

If we turn from general literature to the drama, we feel there also the patriotic note growing steadily clearer and more pronounced. In 1873, on the 15th February, a play called *Bhārat Bilāp* (India's Lament), containing many patriotic songs, was produced on the Exhibition Grounds at Nainur and in it "Mother India" appeared dressed in rags, weeping and with dishevelled hair. About two years later on the 2nd January, 1875, Upendra Nāth Dās, the director of the "Great National Theatre," produced a patriotic drama entitled *Śarat-Sarojinī Nāṭak*. This was followed on the 17th June of the same year by his *Hīrak Chūrṇa* (The Crushed Diamond), which deals with the story of the dethronement of the Gaekwaḍ of Baroda by the Government of India. *Surendra Binodinī*, his third play of a distinctly patriotic nature, was performed on the 14th August, 1875, by an amateur theatrical company at the "New Aryan Theatre." But performances of the play on this stage were soon

discontinued, but Upendra Nāth Dās revived it with singular success at the " Great National Theatre " on the 31st December, 1875. " Birāj-Mohinī," an important female character in this play, is represented as being treated with great cruelty by an English Magistrate. On the 6th March, 1876, the proprietor of the theatre Bhuban Mohan Niyogī, the director Upendra Nāth Dās, the manager Amṛta Lāl Basu, the musical and dancing master and several leading actors were arrested on a charge of producing an indecent play on a public stage (under Sections 292 and 294 of the Indian Penal Code) and sent for trial to the court of the Presidency Magistrate, Mr. Dickens. Upendra Nāth Dās and Amṛta Lāl Basu were found guilty and sentenced to one month's simple imprisonment and the other accused were acquitted. An appeal was lodged in the Calcutta High Court and on the 20th March, the Magistrate's sentence was reversed on the ground that the trial was without any specific charge, and that it also took place without any evidence on record. The first Government action against the Bengali theatre naturally aroused a great deal of indignation. In December, 1876, the Government passed the Dramatic Performances Act, prohibiting the publication or production of such plays as tended to incite anarchy or disaffection against the Government. The Act, though strongly opposed by many sections of the Bengali community, was hailed with satisfaction by the Brāhma Samāj and Anglo-Indians. The Anglo-Indian papers carried on a regular campaign against the " Great National Theatre." In its issue of the 14th March, 1876, the *Indian Daily News* wrote : " Satisfaction will not be fully realized as long as the walls of the pavilion of this infamous company are not levelled to the ground, its furniture confiscated and sold under the hammer of the State. That this theatre has by the introduction of harlots on the stage become the hot-bed of immorality and corruption none can deny."

Sarojinī Nāṭak, written by Jyotirindra Nāth Tagore, and first produced on the 26th December, 1875, was one of the most popular patriotic plays of those days. Dīna Bandhu Mitra's *Nīl Darpaṇ* and Girīś Chandra's *Ānanda Raho*, to both of which reference has already been made, contributed considerably

to the development of patriotism on the stage. Obviously, the new nationalist movement which may be said to have started in 1905, was bound to exercise a great influence on the stage, and, on the other hand, to draw from it considerable support. When the whole of Bengal was thinking almost exclusively in terms of politics and patriotism, it would have been absurd to expect that the drama should not reflect the prevailing temper. Girīś Chandra had written several historical dramas of a nationalistic tendency, and amongst the earliest plays proscribed by the Government were three by Girīś Chandra, *Sirājaddaulā*, *Mīrkāsim* and *Chhatrapati Śivāji*. But it is Dvijendra Lāl Rāy rather than Girīś Chandra, who must be regarded as the true representative of the nationalist movement in the field of the drama. In his historical plays of a definitely political colour, Girīś Chandra seems to be more interested in the objective facts of history, which he reproduces on the stage in embarrassing detail. Into the midst of these facts he introduces long, declamatory speeches which he puts into the mouths of his *dramatis personæ*, but which really represent his own political views. Dvijendra Lāl, on the other hand, in his *Rāṇā Pratāp*, for instance, which was his first attempt at historical drama, is not so much interested in the objective facts as in the characters of the period with which he deals. At the same time his interest in the characters is not merely psychological. He does not so much aim at tracing the development of his hero's personality (at least, so far as *Rāṇā Pratāp* is concerned), but rather presents him to his contemporaries as an ideal for the present day. So while he avoids the propagandist monologue, which characterizes Girīś Chandra's historical plays, he does not hesitate to put the dialogues of his play into the language of to-day. He attempts to translate the history of the past in terms of the present situation. Girīś Chandra tries to photograph the details of history and appends to his photograph his own explanation of its meaning for his own day, whereas Dvijendra Lāl paints a picture of the past which is itself his interpretation of the lessons which it has to teach us. The theme of *Rāṇā Pratāp* is nothing new; this famous Rāṇā of Mewār is the subject of Rameś Chandra Datta's novel, *Rājput Jīban-*

Sandhyā, and of the works of many other earlier Bengali writers of fiction and history. The special feature of the play is its entirely new interpretation of history in the light of the problems brought forward by the exceptional circumstances in 1905 and after. The period of history which is chosen for its theme is not only calculated to evoke patriotic sentiments, but is admirably suited to express some of the most vital tendencies of modern Bengali life and thought. Though based very faithfully on the well-known historical facts, the play is a mirror of contemporary life, in which the hopes and aspirations of the politically-conscious section of the Bengali people are reflected. Each age has to re-interpret history and the classics for itself. A genuine dramatist must accommodate the stories of by-gone ages to our present understanding and taste.

CHAPTER XXV

The Nationalism of Dvijendra Lāl Rāy

Dvijendra Lāl Rāy was deeply stirred by the Svadeśi movement, and for a time almost completely threw himself into it. But at heart, he was too genuine a realist to be overcome by it. He was so mentally constituted that he could not for a moment lose his own individuality, and so he escaped from becoming a bigoted patriot or a fanatical demagogue. His devotion to the motherland, as expressed even in his very first historical work *Rāṇā Pratāp*, which was no doubt written in those very restless times, has not in it the slightest tinge of egotism or insincerity. His sobriety of temperament and his clearness of mental outlook are quite manifest. On his return to India after finishing his studies in England, he had in the beginning found himself alienated from his best friends. He had been subjected to social ostracism by his relatives on account of his independent thinking and frank indifference to some of the established Hindu social customs and practices. He had been deeply mortified at this treatment which seemed to him quite unjustifiable. Naturally, his views on nationalism were from the very beginning coloured by his views on orthodox Hindu society. He found that the problems of social reform and the new aspiration for political freedom were indissolubly linked together, and never for a moment lost sight of the fact that if the country was to become politically free, it must first become free from social evils. As early as 1889, he had published a pamphlet, called *Ekghare* (The Outcast), describing the treatment meted out by Hindu society to youths who had visited England, and in it he bitterly criticized Hindu orthodoxy in language which was very sarcastic and even provocatively harsh. Through experiences of this nature, he had come definitely to believe that not everything in Hinduism was wholesome and good, and that nationalism by itself was not enough to uplift India. Indian manhood must

be regenerated before everything else. This he makes very clear in the concluding song of *Rāṇā Pratāp*, which the heroic Rājput maidens sing in chorus. The burden of the song is: "What matters it that you have lost your land? Be yourselves men once more!" In fact, this song seems to contain the essence of Dvijendra Lāl's creed. He will have nothing to do with that freedom which does not come of inner spiritual strength. Social evils will have to be rectified in the first instance, and then freedom will follow of itself. He had also very clear ideas as regards the exact nature of the disease which was corroding the vitals of Hindu society, and so he could not be oblivious to the difficulties that had to be overcome before real success could be attained. Perhaps the most characteristic expression of Dvijendra Lāl's whole social and political philosophy is to be found in the following scene (Act V, Scene 6,) in *Rāṇā Pratāp:*

GWĀLIOR (*looking at* MĀRWĀR): I told you, didn't I?—that it was useless to expect to win over Mān Siṁha. Freedom for India is but a dream.

MĀN SIṀHA: Freedom, your Highness? If we had any national life, we might talk about freedom. We lost that life ages ago; and now the nation is rotting.

CHĀNDORĪ: How?

MĀN SIṀHA: Do I have to prove that too? This endless idleness, this indifference, this inertia—is not certainly a sign of national life. A Drābīṛ Brāhmaṇ will not dine with a Brāhmaṇ of Benares. You lose your caste if you cross the seas. Religion which is the life-breath of this nation is merely a social convention to-day. There are no signs of national life. The good old days are gone.

BIKĀNĪR: But they may come back if the Hindus are united.

MĀN SIṀHA: It's just that that's impossible. The souls of the Hindus have so shrivelled up, have become so inert and cut-off from one another that unity is out of the question.

GWĀLIOR: Will it never be possible?

MĀN SIṀHA: Yes, but not till the Hindus freed from the bondage of lifeless, meaningless, outworn conventions get a new religion throbbing with living, wide-awake, magnetic energy. . . .

MĀRWĀR: Mān Siṁha speaks the truth.

It will be noticed that Dvijendra Lāl's main emphasis is on the attainment of national unity and harmony and casting off the fetters of an antiquated social system. In a later play, *Mewār Patan* (The Fall of Mewār), he expresses the same sentiments

but more emphatically through the mouth of Mahabat Khān, a Hindu renegade who, when ridiculed by his father, says : " So much envy ! such revengefulness ! No wonder this nation has been the slave of the Muhammadans again and again. No wonder the Muhammadans take full vengeance on this hatred. So this is your liberal, generous, ancient Hindu religion ! The Muhammadan religion, whatever else it is, has at least one great virtue that it accepts a renegade without hesitation, and even makes him its own. And the Hindu religion—what of it ? An apostate can never become a Hindu again even by a hundred penances." Dvijendra Lāl's conception of an ideal Hindu society and the ways and means of attaining true freedom for India is most fully revealed in a conversation between the two noble Rājput ladies of this play (Act V, Scene 4) :

SATYAVATĪ : When did this down-fall of Mewār begin, my child ?

MĀNASĪ : It began from the day when she allowed herself to be led blind-folded by social conventions, from the day when she forgot to think for herself. Mother, the water is pure so long as the stream runs. When the stream stops, worms breed in it. That's why you see in this nation to-day so much base selfishness, meanness, internal strife and hatred of other races. From that point on, this liberal Hindu religion has become a mere lifeless skeleton of convention. What but downfall is possible when religion is lost, mother ? Nobody has time to notice that this nation is full of vice. What's the good of merely weeping and saying " Mewār is ruined " ?

SATYAVATĪ : Is this then the only consolation for our sorrow ?

MĀNASĪ : No. We have a far better consolation, which is this : Mewār is ruined ; let it go ! But let us aim at something better in the future than its mere restoration. I want my brother to be great in moral strength. I want him to make religion his life's pole-star in the midst of all his sorrow and despair and the darkness of the storm. And if he won't, let him perish ; I shall have no regrets.

SATYAVATĪ : Am I to stand and watch my brother perish ?

MĀNASĪ : We'll try our best to save him. But if we can't, let God's will be done. Patriotism is greater than self-seeking, but manhood is greater than patriotism. If patriotism conflicts with manhood, let patriotism be drowned in the sea of manhood. Though it lose land and freedom, let our race attain to manhood again.

SATYAVATĪ : Can that ever be, my child ?

MĀNASĪ: Why not? Let's strive for it. A high ideal never dies. This nation shall surely regain its manhood.

SATYAVATĪ: But when?

MĀNASĪ: . . . The day when the people will cast off the age-worn scriptures and adopt a new religion.

SATYAVATĪ: What's that religion, Mānasī?

MĀNASĪ: That religion is love. They will first have to forget their own selves and gradually learn to love their brethren, their race, mankind and manhood. Then there will be nothing more for them on their own account to do. Their future will shape itself by some unknown law of Providence. The way to national welfare lies not through bloodshed but through love. . . .

Dvijendra Lāl Rāy was one of the very few among the noted Bengalis of that period who refrained from holding out an ideal of narrow-minded nationalism, and insisted on the development of national unity and mutual tolerance. In all the letters [1] he wrote to his friend and biographer, Mr. Deb Kumār Rāy Choudhurī, during the period of the Svadesī agitation, while expressing his most enthusiastic hopes of the movement, he at the same time points out the only conditions upon which success is possible. It may, perhaps, be well to add that the passages quoted above to illustrate the political and social philosophy of Dvijendra Lāl were not dragged into the dialogue merely for the sake of saying something bearing upon the political situation of the dramatist's own day. They develop quite naturally from the historical circumstances portrayed, and are in a quite appropriate dramatic setting.

[1] See Deb Kumār Rāy Choudhurī, *Dvijendra Lāl*, 2nd ed., pp. 391–2, 396, 431–2, 443–9.

CHAPTER XXVI

The Plays of Dvijendra Lāl Rāy

The beginning of Dvijendra Lāl Rāy's interest in the drama is to be found in his youthful enthusiasm for the English stage and English dramatic literature. While in London studying for a degree in agriculture, he used to visit the different English theatres. The late Justice Sir Āśutoṣ Chaudhurī bears testimony to Dvijendra Lāl's interest in English plays: "One day I went with Dviju to the 'Drury Lane Theatre' to see a pantomime. It was a performance of 'Aladdin and His Wonderful Lamp.' Dviju was so wonder-struck by the scene in which, by the magic touch of the lamp, the beautiful royal palace of white marble was revealed that I could not help being amazed. He was just like a child in his enjoyment of such stage-wonders." [1] At this time Dvijendra Lāl had not thought seriously of writing plays himself. He was, however, extremely fond of English poetry and surprised everybody by publishing an original book of poems entitled *The Lyrics of Ind*. In the introduction to the work he wrote: "The principal object in the composition of the following verses has been to harmonize English and Indian poetries as they ought to be. Both are beautiful; but whilst the one is visionary and sensuous, the other is vigorous and chaste; whilst the one dreams, the other soars; whereas the one makes a poetry of religion, the other makes a religion of poetry. If it has pleased God to unite England and India in the strong ties of wedded interest, and in the still stronger, more sacred and indissoluble bond of mutual love and gratitude, it is the aim of the author to establish a marriage and an intellectual commerce between their poetries as well." [2] Later, when he returned to India, he wrote an account of the origin of the *Lyrics of Ind* in a Bengali theatrical monthly called

[1] See Deb Kumār Rāy Choudhurī, *Dvijendra Lāl*, p. 190.
[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 174–5.

Nāṭya Mandir. In one place he says, "From my very childhood I have been so excessively fond of poetry and drama that as a student I committed to memory two cantos each of *Manfred* and *Childe Harold*, and portions of *Meghdūta* and *Uttar Rāma-Charita*. While in England I read Shelley constantly and on my return here I read Shakespeare and Wordsworth regularly. I first began to write poems during my stay in England; I collected them together and asked permission of Sir Edwin Arnold to dedicate them to him and sent him the manuscripts. He wrote to me giving his permission and encouraging my enterprise and I published them as *Lyrics of Ind*." [1] This work is important only so far as it shows the literary tendencies of Dvijendra Lāl. Otherwise, it was rather juvenile and full of youthful whimsicality. Dvijendra Lāl never wrote anything in English afterwards.

For several years before he had published *Rāṇā Pratāp*, he was already well known in Bengal as a writer of farcical comedies and humorous songs, and as a literary critic of considerable promise. His first dramatic work was a farce, called *Kalkī Abatār* (Kalkī-Incarnation), published in 1895. The play mercilessly satirized all sections of the Hindu community and even made fun of the Hindu scriptures, gods and goddesses. The only effect of this injudicious criticism was to antagonize the rigidly orthodox Bengalis. Perhaps on account of this fact, the farce was never presented on the public stage. The same fate overtook *Pāṣāṇī*, published in 1901. *Biraha* (The Lover's Longing), written in 1897, and *Trahya Sparśa* (An Unlucky Conjunction of Three Planets), published in 1900, were both comedies of a farcical nature. His first contact with the professional stage came through his *Prāyaśchitta* (Atonement), produced under the title of *Bahut Āchhā* (Right Ho !) in 1901. At first he showed himself to be very puritanical in theatrical matters, and was deeply impressed by the lack of sound, moral standards in professional dramatic circles. He was particularly opposed to the employment of low women in public theatres. An interesting story is told by the well-known Bengali journalist Pāñch Kouṛi Bannerji, of how he once dragged Dvijendra Lāl

[1] See *Dvijendra Lāl*, p. 174.

against his will to witness a rehearsal of *Bahut Āchhā* at the "Classic Theatre," and how after this he came to revise his views in regard to the professional stage.[1] Dvijendra Lāl realized that there ought not to be any moral obloquy incurred in coming in contact with actresses who, though branded by Hindu society as fallen women, were devoting their lives to the cause of an art. On one occasion he expressly said to his friend, Mr. Deb Kumār Rāy Choudhurī: "This condition is inevitable on account of our present social system, but I think it is really good for those so-called fallen women. In all sections of our community we have two kinds of men and women, good and bad. The public theatres are doing excellent work in giving opportunity to those among this class of women who are willing to earn an honest living. If to go to a theatre means ruining one's morals, then one would have to be kept at home under lock and key. . . . I am sure by seeing good plays in a theatre, one only improves one's character."[2] In point of fact, Dvijendra Lāl Rāy had the greatest respect for womenkind in general. In several plays he has introduced courtesans (for example, Śāntā in *Para Pāre*) and has revealed through them some of the finest qualities of womanhood. We may take as an illustration of Dvijendra Lāl's characteristic point of view in this matter the following scene from *Sājāhān*:

First Woman: Fair youth, who are you?

Solemān: I am Prince Dārā's son; Solemān is my name.

First Woman: You mean Dārā, the son of the Emperor Sājāhān, and you are his son?

Solemān: Yes.

First Woman: Why don't you ask me who I am? I am the principal dancing-girl of Kashmir, the king's mistress, a courtesan. These you see are my companions. Come with us in this boat.

Solemān: With you? You unfortunate woman! Why? What for?

First Woman: Solemān, you are no child; you know our profession.

Solemān: Yes, I know. That's why I pity you so much. This beauty, this youth—are they things to be sold? Beauty is

[1] See *Dvijendra Lāl*, pp. 263-4.
[2] *Ibid.*, pp. 359-61.

merely a form, love is its real soul. Woman, what shall I do with a body that has no soul ?

First Woman : Why ? Don't we know how to love ?

Solemān : How should you know ? You who sell your beauty—and even your smiles—how should you know how to love ? Love only knows how to give. It asks for no return. Happiness lies in sacrifice. My child, how should you know that happiness ?

First Woman : Do you mean to say that we never love ?

Solemān : Yes, you do. You love a filigree turban, diamond rings, embroidered shoes, an ivory stick. You love curly hair, almond eyes, a straight nose and sweet lips. You see I am good-looking and I am the grandson of the Emperor, so you are captivated with me. This is no love. True love is between soul and soul. Go away, my child.

First Woman : Young man, you shall pay for this.

Solemān : My dear child, why so angry ? I have no hatred or contempt for you. I have only pity—an endless unfathomable pity.

Dvijendra Lāl's next important serious work after the publication of *Rāṇā Pratāp* is *Durgā Dās*, written about the beginning of 1906, while he was serving as a Deputy Magistrate at Gayā, and first produced at the "Minerva Theatre." The story of the play is based on a most dramatic episode in the historic struggle of Mārwār and Mewār with the cruel and crafty Mogul Emperor, Aurangzeb for national independence. It deals with the grim, relentless resolution of the Rājput race to fight and die for their land rather than submit to the domination of the Muhammadans. Dvijendra Lāl was indebted to Todd's *Annals of Rajasthan* for the general historical facts. The play is a tragedy, but not in the strict Aristotelian sense of the downfall or death of a hero, caused by the forces set against him. It is only the tragedy of the failure of a noble ideal. The hero Durgā Dās does not die, but fails in his purpose to lift up his people. The tragedy does not consist merely in the external overthrow of the army of Durgā Dās and his Mewār ally, Rāj Siṁha, but in the hopeless struggle of an ideal against a malevolent and merciless fate, as it were, what Thomas Hardy would call "The Circumstantial Will." At the close of the play we pass from the din of battle to a quiet conversation which raises issues far greater than those that had been decided

by the recent conflict, and gives to the play an impression of wholeness which could never have been obtained by a story of personal or even of national catastrophe. We are made to realize that the innermost heart of tragedy can only be read by those who are able to rise above its mere external happenings. The chivalry and selfless loyalty of Durgā Dās and the bigotry and wily subtleties of Aurangzeb are portrayed with great dramatic skill. The character of the passionate queen, Gulneyār, is also very finely drawn. In fact, all the characters in the drama are painted in such bold and vigorous lines as to leave a deep and lasting impression on the mind. The long patriotic speeches of Mahāmāyā, the widow-queen of Jaśawanta Siṁha, are the only feature of the play to which serious objection can be taken. But even here, Dvijendra Lāl, anticipating such an objection, quotes in his preface from some unnamed historian the remark: "The widow of Jeswant Sing was in the meantime animating the might of the Aravalli Hills."

Dvijendra Lāl's next work, *Nūrjāhān*, was also written at Gayā. It was completed in December, 1906, and published by the author himself on the 1st March, 1908. The play was first performed at the "Minerva Theatre." It is an historical drama, based on the life and career of Nūrjāhān, first the wife of Ser Khān, a Mogul general, and later the Begum of the Emperor Jāhāngīr. In his two earlier historical plays, *Rāṇā Pratāp* and *Durgā Dās*, the principal object of Dvijendra Lāl had been to idealize the heroic characters of history. But in this play he made the first serious attempt at drawing human nature just as it is, with all the defects of its qualities, putting a greater stress on psychological analysis than upon the incidents of the play. No character in Indian history would have furnished such excellent material for such a purpose as that of the Empress Nūrjāhān, whose whole life is one long story of mental conflict. Her ambition, her passion and her heroism show at every point the action of those conflicting forces which spring inevitably out of the two sides of a strong nature. In the play, she appears like an elemental spirit, revelling in her reckless passion, and crushing everything that obstructs her insatiable ambition for power. There is not the slightest touch of self-consciousness

either in her relentless pursuit after fame or her self-abandonment in love. Jāhāngīr in his mad love for this woman contrives the death of her first husband, Ser Khān, and makes her his queen; from this point begins her stormy career, devoted exclusively to the fulfilment of personal ambition and desire. We find her intriguing to destroy the Mogul Empire itself merely as an act of self-revenge. In all her machinations she is pitiless and ruthless, and yet she is not without a touch of the grandeur of a heroine. Such fierce intensity has gone into the creation of the complex personality of Nūrjāhān that we cannot help feeling impressed by a haunting and poignant beauty under all her schemes of self-destruction. She is the very embodiment of "infinite passion and the pain of finite hearts that yearn." Defeated and disgraced in the end, she succumbs to the elemental call of motherhood roused by her own long-suffering and much-neglected daughter, Laylā, and thus the play closes on a human note which is quite in keeping with the dramatist's approach to the whole theme from the psychological standpoint.

Nūrjāhān marks a distinct stage in the development of Dvijendra Lāl's dramatic art in that it was the outcome of a definite change in his technique, namely, the adoption of the psychological type of dramatic invention. It ought to be mentioned here that the change in his method of play-writing was to a large extent brought about by the influence of the views of his friend, Sir Loken Pālit, on dramatic matters. Sir Loken was serving as a District Judge at Gayā at the time *Nūrjāhān* was being contemplated. The two friends used to have long discussions on various matters relating to play-writing and literature in general. It is said that Sir Loken strongly urged Dvijendra Lāl to discard the method of merely idealising historical characters and further suggested that he should subordinate facts to the exposition of inner motives. Dvijendra Lāl accepted his friend's advice and *Nūrjāhān* was the first result.[1]

In his next work, however, *Mewār Patan* (The Fall of Mewār), written during the latter part of 1906 and produced for the first time at the "Minerva Theatre," Dvijendra Lāl did not follow his new method. He made it purposely a propaganda play. His

[1] See *Dvijendra Lāl*, pp. 481–6.

main object was to elucidate in it his social and political philosophy, which he had the courage to do even in the midst of the violent nationalism of those days. He took the story from one of the most eventful episodes of the Muhammadan period of Indian history—the last struggles of the heroes of Mewār against the Moguls. The principal hero on the Mogul side is the Hindu renegade, Mahabat Khān and of the Rajputs, Rāṇā Amar Siṁha. The dramatist makes Mānasī, the daughter of the Rāṇā, his ideal prototype of a love of humanity that transcends the limitations of religion and race. From beginning to end the play is a thrilling tale of heroism and romance, evoking feelings of patriotism and chivalry, most of which find expression in the songs sung by a chorus of the maidens of Mewār, led by the Rāṇā's cousin, Satyavatī. It must be admitted that the author's views on nationalism do not in the slightest degree militate against the artistic unity of the story as a whole. The words in which the two royal ladies Mānasī and Satyavatī exhort the nation to rise upon the ashes of its defeat, sweep away the sense of tragedy ; the song with which the play ends purges the mind of all the noise and conflict of war and hatred. *Mewār Patan* may be regarded as Dvijendra Lāl's most ironic comment on the insignificance of what is achieved by misguided people, who set out to bring about the millennium by violence and bloodshed. In June, 1907, a few months after *Mewār Patan* was written, Dvijendra Lāl composed his famous national song " Āmār Deś " (My Country). It is said that the renowned scientist Sir Jagadīś Chandra Basu suggested the idea of the song.[1] When Dvijendra Lāl sang it himself for the first time before Sir Loken Pālit, the latter is said to have exclaimed, " Oh, how wonderful—how magnificent ! Let me confess, my dear Dviju, it's undoubtedly the very, very best and noblest song that I've ever heard or read in my life. It is, indeed, a divine inspiration." [2] Perhaps it may be of interest to mention in this connection that Dvijendra Lāl was a noted singer and himself set all his lyrics to appropriate music. He established a musical society in his own house at Gayā and used

[1] See *Dvijendra Lāl*, p. 476.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 479.

to hold a regular "majlis" at which vocal and instrumental music was rendered by well-known artists. When he returned to live permanently in Calcutta, he founded the "Pūrṇimā-Milan," a club which met regularly in his own house on the night of the full moon (pūrṇimā). On these occasions, Dvijendra Lāl and his numerous friends and admirers discussed literature and music, recited poetry, and sang songs.

It was after his return to Calcutta some time in 1908 or 1909 that he wrote *Sājāhān*, which was published in September, 1910. Since its first production at the "Minerva Theatre" it has been staged so many times by the different professional and amateur theatrical companies in various parts of Bengal that it has come to be the best known of his plays. *Sājāhān* is unquestionably his greatest drama—the finest product of his mature art. Not only in its literary grace, its psychological portraiture of characters and its admirable presentation of the facts of history, but even in its minutest structural details, it is perfect and lends itself to very successful representation on the stage. The play deals with the decline of the Mogul Empire brought about by the fratricidal war for the throne between the four sons of the Emperor Sājāhān, the generous-hearted Dārā, the heir-apparent, the soldier and gentleman Sujā, the shrewd and crafty diplomat, Aurangzeb, and the youngest and pleasure-loving Murad. Other principal characters are the patriotic and chivalrous Yodhpur prince, Jaśawanta Siṁha and his noble wife, the treacherous King of Jaipur, the proud and heroic Princess Jāhānārā and the lovely and loveable Piyārā, the wife of Sūjā, and the witty and enigmatical Dildār, a holy man incognito. But the finest portraiture of all is that of the broken-hearted old Emperor Sājāhān, a shadow of his former self, dreaming of his days of vanished glory and pining away for his long-lost dearly beloved queen. He is constantly swayed by two strong elemental emotions, each equally powerless to help him—the selfless, all-forgiving affection of a father's heart and the feelings of pride, justice and stern rectitude of a royal monarch. Aurangzeb heaps upon him one indignity after another and finally reduces him into a state of complete impotence. Destitute, decrepit and forlorn, the brave old King, like a caged

lion, groans and growls in his prison, and fain would he, if he could, unsheath his sceptre and smite Aurangzeb with it, and thus restore peace and justice to the world. But his helplessness is so keen and poignant as to make him lose his mind. There is a touch of King Lear in Dvijendra Lāl's magnificent creation of Sājāhān.

So far Dvijendra Lāl had dealt in his dramas only with the Muhammadan period of Indian history, but in his next play, *Chandra Gupta*, published in 1911, and first produced at the "Minerva Theatre," he depicted the rise and growth of the Maurya dynasty under the Hindu king, Chandra Gupta. Chandra Gupta, though born of a Śūdra mother, rose to be a great warrior and ascended the throne of Maghadha, after dethroning his half-brother, Nanda. Chandra Gupta was an empire builder, resolved to unite India under his own sway. He married Helen, the daughter of a Greek general, named Seleukos. Some of the incidents of the play are derived from the Purāṇas and the Indian history of a later period, but in the general treatment of the plot as a whole, Dvijendra Lāl relied almost entirely on his own invention. Chandra Gupta is not really the chief figure in the play; the real hero is his shrewd and skilful Prime Minister, Chāṇakya, the uncompromising champion of Brāhmaṇ supremacy. He is Machiavellian in his diplomacy and conduct of the affairs of the State. He is depicted as a super-man in every sense of the term. In political ambition he is unrelenting and ruthless, in religion he is an agnostic. He is so austere in his principles as to be almost ego-centric, and yet he is never mean. The central theme of the drama is the intense psychological conflict in the mind of this great Brāhmaṇ. On the one hand, we see him defying both God and man and resolutely stifling in his heart all human feeling, and on the other hand, when injustice has deprived him of his daughter, the only comfort of his old age, he shows himself as capable of the deep emotion appropriate to so strong a nature. Every other incident in the play pales into insignificance before the mighty passions of this one great powerful figure.

Chandra Gupta is marked throughout by a clever manipulation of facts, an evenness of judgment and taste, and a well-balanced

and flexible imagination. The language of the play is its best feature. Words flow with such beautiful simplicity and appropriateness that there is not a single jarring note in the play. *Chandra Gupta* restores to the Indian drama that fine sense of language and that distinction of style which it once possessed but lost long ago. The play shows the mark of culture and erudition and appeals to our æsthetic and literary sensibilities. Another important feature of the play is its successful characterization of some of the minor people in it. On the one hand, we have Bāchāl, the garrulous brother-in-law of King Nanda, and Kātyāyan, the King's Minister, who goes about quoting his pet rules of grammar and citing Pāṇini as his authority in all affairs, and on the other hand, we have a charming and youthful Greek soldier called Antigonus and an extremely lovely young lady, Chhāyā (the sister of Chandra Ketu, the King of Malay), with her love-songs and unrequited love for Chandra Gupta. These minor characters are skilfully adjusted to the evolution of the central theme of the drama in a way that would have been impossible except by an experienced craftsman.

Para Pāre (On the Further Shore) was Dvijendra Lāl's last work, published in 1912.[1] It is the most ambitious of all his dramatic productions. It is a social play and the only one of its kind he ever attempted to write. It stands almost in a class by itself, because of the novelty of its invention and the daring way in which it confronts the social problems of modern Bengal, dealing with them, not one by one, but as together constituting a situation which has to be faced as a whole. Girīś Chandra's social plays, like *Praphulla* and *Balidān*, never reached that wholeness of outlook which is displayed in this play. Evils such as early marriage, dowry-system, and Kulīnism had been dealt with by Dvijendra Lāl's predecessors, but these constitute only a very small part of the disease with which the Hindu society is afflicted. In *Para Pāre*, Dvijendra Lāl made a very

[1] Dvijendra Lāl left two plays in unfinished form, which have been lately published under the titles of *Siṁhal Bijay* (The Conquest of Ceylon) and *Baṅga Nārī* (The Women of Bengal), and also successfully produced at various theatres in Calcutta and outside.

definite attempt at a diagnosis of this disease and to attack it from all quarters. He had, however, no preconceived theory to support nor was he merely aiming at the expression of righteous indignation, least of all was he indulging in progaganda. He merely sought to present an accurate picture of the social conditions prevalent in his own day.

The plot of *Para Pāre* is briefly this. Sarayū, the granddaughter of a kind and benevolent wealthy Bengali gentleman, named Biśeśvar, is married to a handsome youth named Mahimā Rañjan. Mahimā is so utterly infatuated with his young wife that he forgets himself, even to the extent of neglecting his duties and forsaking his old mother. The tragedy is quite clearly forshadowed in the scenes of irresponsible love-making between this newly-married couple. Thus in the first struggle between duty and pleasure, Mahim fails. The unfortunate mother dies. Mahim, with his uncontrolled and irresponsible nature soon gets tired of his wife and begins to live secretly with a prostitute, called Śāntā. The fall of the hero really starts at this point, and as the play advances, we find him sinking lower and lower into the depths of moral ruin. Biśveśvar knows nothing of his degradation and continues to give him his usual monthly remittances, which Mahim squanders. Sarayū endures patiently and wastes away in grief and remorse. Her infant son dies for lack of proper medical treatment. Sarayū's passive helplessness only aggravates the tragic happenings. She does not even tell her grandfather the actual state of affairs, but he is at last informed of it by a friend named Dayāl. The old man cannot understand why Mahim should neglect Sarayū, and reasons rather foolishly that the prostitute Śāntā must surely be more beautiful and attractive than Sarayū. Now he makes a desperate attempt to save Mahim. He goes to Śāntā, offers her money and asks her to leave Mahim, which she does. One day, strangely enough, Śāntā comes secretly to interview Sarayū and finds her in the most pitiful condition imaginable, wistfully gazing at the window, with tears in her eyes and musing over her forlorn state. Śāntā is deeply touched and says to herself, "This wife ! This chaste woman ! What a light in her eyes ! What a noble brow ! How beautiful she is !" Face to face with this deserted and devoted wife she is suddenly overcome

by remorse and filled with self-loathing. The two women then unburden their hearts to one another and each feels compassion for the other, and their mutual understanding and sympathy bring comfort to both of them. As soon as Śāntā leaves, Mahim appears in a drunken state and pours his wrath upon his wife. He threatens to kill her with a pistol, when Śāntā suddenly re-appears. Mahim fires at Śāntā, who drops down on the ground as if dead. Neighbours and servants rush in, and Mahim takes flight. He goes to Biśveśvar to ask him to shelter him. Though Sarayū forgives her husband and even implores her grandfather to help him, the old man refuses, saying justice must take its course. Mahim is arrested and tried for the murder of Śāntā. It is admitted at the trial that Śāntā's body was not found in the room, but a corpse afterwards identified as that of Śāntā was found in a tank ten days later. Sarayū intervenes at the trial and to save her husband from death, says that it was she who fired the shot. Upon this she is condemned to death, taken to prison, but on the day the sentence is to be executed, Śāntā herself arrives on the scene and discloses her own identity. Sarayū is released and now goes in search of Biśveśvar, who, after taking a final leave of her in the prison, has wandered to Benares under the impression that she has been hanged. At last when Sarayū finds him, he is dying of a self-inflicted wound. Biśveśvar dies praying that they may meet again in another world—" on the further shore." Soon after Sarayū dies of grief. The last scene brings Mahim and Śāntā together at a cremation ground. Śāntā beckons Mahim to look across the river far, far out into the distance of the other world, and the vision of the Eternal Mother, in whom all the dead rest, is revealed to their eyes, and Mahim cries out from the fullness of his heart, " Mother ! Oh, Mother ! "

In such a threadbare synopsis of the story, stripped of its dramatic covering, it is impossible to describe adequately the beauty and pathos of the play. Moreover, it has to be confessed that at more than one point there is a certain lack of verisimilitude in the course of events, which at times threatens to reduce the whole performance to the level of melodrama. But the play, as acted, grips one so completely that one forgets

such inconsistencies and defects. *Para Pāre* presents a striking picture of the interplay of the most elemental human passions. It is not a mere slice of life with which we are here concerned, but life as a whole and the conflict of its rival loyalties. It is not a problem play in the strict sense of the term, and yet it deals with a great problem—the problem of human love—the love of a mother for her son, the love of a devoted wife for her unworthy husband, the love between a man and a prostitute, and the love of a grandfather for his grand-daughter. It shows how these loves clash with one another and bring about a catastrophe. The question arises, which of these is really the greatest and which can really endure the corrosions of time and circumstance—love as a dominating physical passion or love as the spiritual essence of purity and self-sacrifice ? In the conflict again between love and duty, the problem also arises as to which of the two is greater and more human ? The world which the author has created in the play seems to suggest that tragedy is tragedy not because love must fight duty at every point, but that love must die a physical death in the struggle. Then, what remains ? The author's answer is unequivocal; and yet mystical : love survives in its pure form in the other world—" on the further shore "—when it has transcended the limitations of mortality. The dramatist does not aim at answering these questions philosophically but leaves us to make our own inference ; his purpose is only to hold the mirror up to nature and to show that struggle *does* exist and a drama of love must not ignore it, if it claims to be true to the facts of life. There is a scene in the play in which Dvijendra Lāl humorously discusses the problem of a dramatist in regard to the treatment of love. The scene (Scene 2, Act IV) may be regarded as his most trenchant comment on the conventional way of dealing with love and idealizing it beyond the bounds of recognition. Biśveśvar is talking with Sarayū about love at first sight and how it should be treated in a conventional drama :—

SARAYŪ : Well, what then ?

BIŚVEŚVAR : Then ?—Well, then comes the lover's soliloquy and the restlessness of his lady-love. The lover proceeds to declaim poetry to her and she falls down on the ground in a faint.

SARAYŪ : Yes, and then ?

BIŚVEŚVAR : Now comes the lady's confidante on the scene. All ladies in love must have at least one confidante, you know ; or there could not be any love.

SARAYŪ : Oh ! is that so ?—there couldn't be any love ?

BIŚVEŚVAR (*shaking his head*) : No. It would be absolutely impossible. If she has no bosom friend, to whom is she to sing her songs ? Love could never get under way without song.

SARAYŪ : Quite so, and then ?

BIŚVEŚVAR : The lady's friend enters and fans her. She comes to ; slowly she walks away. The lady's skirt is caught in the branch of a tree ; she turns and looks at her lover. The lady sighs and the lover exclaims, " Alack, I am undone ! " Exit the lady, and the lover—now, what does he do ?

SARAYŪ : How can I say ? It is you who are giving the description.

BIŚVEŚVAR : Quite right, but at this point I cannot very well piece it together. Won't you try your hand at it, my dear ? Now tell me—what must the lover do ?—Tell me, quick. Else everything will be spoilt.

SARAYŪ : All right then, the lover goes home, eats more rice than is good for him and rises refreshed to attack the situation once more.

BIŚVEŚVAR : There now, you have gone and spoilt it all.

SARAYŪ : Why ?

BIŚVEŚVAR : Oh ! the mere mention of that eating business spoils everything. All my efforts have been wasted. To finish up with eating rice !—goodness gracious !

SARAYŪ : H'm, but people can't love on an empty stomach. Love's hard work. He can have " luchis " instead of rice if you like, but something he must eat. Go on, what next ?

BIŚVEŚVAR : Wait a bit. Let me see once more where we have got to. I was getting on splendidly until you introduced that eating business of yours. Let me pull myself together. Wait a minute.

SARAYŪ : All right, there's no hurry.

BIŚVEŚVAR (*collecting himself and rising*) : Now, how far have I got ? Yes, I remember—exit the lover. Then one day there is a storm, the lover has no boat to cross the river ; he jumps into the river, swims across and runs immediately to scale the wall of the house of his lady-love—

SARAYŪ : No—no, that won't do. You have left something out.

BIŚVEŚVAR : What ?

SARAYŪ : The corpse and the snake.[1]

[1] Obviously, the reference is to Girīś Chandra's *Bilva Maṅgal Thākur*, in which the hero crosses the river on a corpse thinking it to be a barge and climbs a wall holding on to a snake, thinking it to be a rope dropped down by his mistress to help him up.

BIŚVEŚVAR: You *are* prosaic to bring a corpse into a tale of this kind.

SARAYŪ: I didn't bring it in—why should I? It's all there in the *Bhakta-Māl*. All right, what next?

BIŚVEŚVAR: Well, the rest is easy. The lover meets his lady. The lady is shy. The confidante reappears. A secret marriage. The doors of the fairyland open. The curtain falls.

SARAYŪ: How impossible! Does love end there?

BIŚVEŚVAR: Of course it does. When they are once married, what more do you want?

SARAYŪ: Isn't there anything after that?

BIŚVEŚVAR: What more can there be?

SARAYŪ: H'm. That won't do. Shall I tell you what comes next?

BIŚVEŚVAR: Yes, let's hear.

SARAYŪ: Then the lady goes to her father-in-law's house; she cooks, deals out the stores; her lord and master has his breakfast and goes to the office.

BIŚVEŚVAR: That sort of thing is never written in plays or poems.

SARAYŪ: No. Poetry can't stand such truthfulness. Where real truth begins, the drama ends.[1]

Though not a producer himself, Dvijendra Lāl had the sense of the stage in a remarkable degree, and was all the time keenly conscious of the fact that the Bengali stage had not yet developed efficient enough producers or sufficiently competent actors and actresses to do full justice to his plays. The most noteworthy feature of his dramatic art is the ease and fluency of his language. He had a real gift for inventing the right words for the right moment, and especially, words to express highly intensified feelings and moods. Thus we find that the words of his *dramatis personæ* flow naturally out of the situation with which they are confronted. Sometimes the words abound in similes and metaphors, not at all of a conventional and stilted kind, but quite appropriate to the emotions intended to be conveyed. Like Bernard Shaw, Dvijendra Lāl Rāy has written prefaces to his plays, but his pamphleteering work is hardly successful in its execution. He falls to abusing real and imaginary critics quite unnecessarily and is very haughty and pedantic in tone. Dvijendra Lāl did not do well with his poetic dramas,

[1] See *Para Pāre*, 2nd ed., Calcutta, 1913, pp. 121–3.

such as *Sītā*, *Pāṣāṇī* and *Tārā Bāi*, but he showed independence of tradition. In comic plays he was not very successful either. His comedies are no doubt free from vulgarism and indecent jokes, but even the best of them such as *Puṇarjanma* (Re-Birth) and *Prāyaśchitta* (Atonement) are hardly worthy to be mentioned with those of either Madhu Sūdan or Dīna Bandhu. His humour is, however, much better revealed in the numerous comic songs he has written. It is in his serious plays that Dvijendra Lāl is at his best. He never wrote to satisfy a temporary public sentiment and seldom played to the gallery. He was not a professional dramatist like Girīś Chandra, and disliked art to be cheap and common-place. He was not a doctrinaire or a moral preacher. He was a realist, knew the details of everyday life, and sought to present truth not for the sake of championing a cause, but because he could not help saying things which he found to be real and true. He never lost sight of his true aim which was not to imitate life but to produce the illusion of life.

We have already pointed out that Dvijendra Lāl started by idealizing the characters of past history and later began to subordinate incident to the study of character from the psychological side. Possessing as he did the true artist's insight, it did not take him long to discover the uselessness of the conventional method of treating a character either as absolutely divine or absolutely devilish, for real life does not corroborate such a classification. Life is a mixture of opposites—nothing is either completely good or completely bad. Man struggles on and it is in the struggle that he must either succeed or fail. That is precisely why Nūrjāhān, Chāṇakya and Aurangzeb are much nearer to real life than Rāṇā Pratāp, Amar Siṁha and Chandra Ketu. In Sājāhān and Biśveśvar, which are perhaps the best examples of his maturer method of character-drawing, he describes life, not as it ought to be, but as it is. It is on such examples of characterization, in close connection with a strong plot, that his real fame as a dramatist must rest. His wonderful creative power of imagination makes one feel the glamour of places and the actuality of the past. Dvijendra Lāl could take an old story or a folk-song and re-shape it so as to suit the sentiments of the

present day. He compels our interest in his historical dramas by means of no literary trick, but by making us feel that the men and women of the past were real, live human beings. He not only knew his history through and through, but, what is more, he knew how to present it, in such fashion as to make it intelligible and give it a powerful appeal to the modern mind. He welds the past and present inseparably together and reveals to us the spiritual continuity of history. He shows that the national type of character is only the embodiment of centuries of tradition and culture. This may perhaps explain the conservative trend of his mind and why he looked with a cautious eye on the idea of a revolution which threatened to sweep away the sacred heritage of the past. His opposition to the Nationalist movement in its militant form is quite intelligible if we bear this in mind. He heartily welcomed it as a cleansing and constructive influence, but insisted that it must build society on firmer and saner lines. None loved his country and countrymen better than he, and no man was so tender, sympathetic and tolerant of the weaknesses of others. But he had no liking for the uneducated mob ; he was a man of sensitive feeling and was responsive to culture and breeding. Brutality and ignorance he hated heartily and condemned them without equivocation in forceful language.

After the passing away of Dvijendra Lāl, his mantle fell upon Paṇḍit Kṣīrod Prasād Vidyābinod. He had already attracted public attention by the successful production of his delightful romantic comedy, *Āli Bābā*, and he leapt into sudden fame immediately after the performance at the " Emerald Theatre " of his historical drama, *Phul Sayyā* (" The Couch of Flowers "). The play is a tragedy, based on the life and character of the Prince of Chitor, Pṛthvirāj. The fame of Kṣīrod Prasād mainly rests on his historical plays. The best known of these besides the one mentioned are *Āheriyā*, a romantic play dealing with the Rājput festival of hunting, *Bāṅglār Masnad* (The Throne of Bengal), depicting the overthrow of the Nawab of Mursidābād, Sarfarāj Khān, by a warrior from Patna, named Ālibardī Khān and *Ālamgīr*, a tragic drama of the closing years of the life and reign of Aurangzeb. Amongst other well-known historical plays

of his are *Padminī*, *Chāṁd Bibi* and *Baṅge Rāṭhoṛ* (describing the invasion of Bengal by the Rāṭhoṛ clan of the Rājput race). These plays of Kṣīrod Prasād have contributed largely to the revival of historical drama, started by Dvijendra Lāl. Kṣīrod Prasād's Paurāṇic plays, like *Sāvitrī and Bhīṣma*, and religious plays such as *Daulate Duniā* and *Pramod Ranjan*, are also worthy of mention. From the very beginning of his career, Kṣīrod Prasād has been in much closer touch with the professional stage than Dvijendra Lāl. He has consistently patronized one or other of the existing theatres in Calcutta. Even when Dvijendra Lāl was living and at the height of his popularity, the Paṇḍit was by no means lost sight of by the play-goers of Bengal. He has always impressed the lovers of the stage by the distinctive originality of his treatment of historical themes, by his forceful style, and above all by the fertility of his imagination and the soundness of his taste. We are hardly in a position to estimate Kṣīrod Prasād's place in the development of the Bengali drama, because he is still producing new works which seem to suggest that he has not yet arrived at the highest point of his dramatic genius. But everything that he is doing augurs well for the future, and he has given us reason to expect from him still greater things.

RABĪNDRA NĀTH TAGORE

CHAPTER XXVII

His Earlier Dramas [1]

Rabīndra Nāth Tagore is known in the West chiefly as a writer of lyric poetry, but he is very much more than a poet. Indeed, there are probably very few living men who have exhibited such remarkable versatility. How many-sided are his activities will be realized when one remembers that besides being a poet, he is also a dramatist of real distinction, a novelist, a literary critic, a renowned educationist, a religious teacher, a social reformer, and a writer of political and historical tracts, ethical treatises, children's books and poems and miscellaneous essays. But one thing is common to every field of his literary effort, which is that it is always unmistakably affected by his own personal æsthetic outlook and philosophical ideas. Through each one of his mediums of expression, he discloses the innermost workings of his mind and his life's varied experiences, and by the sheer magic of words he weaves all his work into forms of rare beauty and meaning. The form may differ endlessly, but the essence remains always the same, namely, the expression of his own *self*. Primarily he is a critic of life—not merely life as we see it, clothed in its physical trappings and social and moral conventions, but life that is much larger and deeper than the human mind can comprehend. Our object is to discuss his dramatic work in close relation to this particular aspect of his creative consciousness, which is all the while seeking to express in his works his literary ideas, æsthetic beliefs, and the spiritual

[1] No attempt has been made to deal with all of Rabīndra Nāth Tagore's dramas. Certain representative plays alone have been discussed. In making the selection, preference has been given to plays that have appeared in an English translation, though the criticism has of course been based in every instance on the Bengali originals. Amongst the plays which have not been dealt with may be mentioned *Chira Kumār Sabha* (The Bachelors' Club), *Goṛāy Galad* (A Muddle at the Start) recently produced in a slightly altered form and with a different title *Śeṣ-Rakṣā* (Saved at the End), *Mukta Dhāra* (The Stream Set Free), *Gṛha Prabeś* (The House Warming).

meaning of his philosophy of life. It should be pointed out at the very outset that Rabīndra Nāth has tried to keep himself scrupulously aloof from the professional Bengali stage. He has written and produced most of his plays independently. His dramatic work has developed along lines of its own, quite distinct from those which have hitherto marked the evolution of the main body of the modern Bengali drama. He has not written plays for the public but has rather created a public for his plays. So from a purely professional point of view his dramatic work may be said to have made very little impression on the ordinary Bengali play-goer, although its originality and power of appeal are almost undisputed among those whom we may regard as the "high-brow" enthusiasts of the Bengali drama.

Rabīndra Nāth's earliest attempt at play-writing was a musical play called *Vālmiki Pratibhā* (The Genius of Vālmiki), written shortly after his first visit to England, when he was barely twenty years old.[1] This play was the first outcome of his interest in and study of the relation between Indian and European music. But there were other important circumstances which suggested such a composition. In the first place, as Rabīndra Nāth himself says, "In our house, at the time, a cascade of musical emotion was gushing forth day after day, hour after hour; its scattered spray reflecting into our being a whole gamut of rainbow colours. Then, with the freshness of youth, our new-born energy, impelled by its virgin curiosity, struck out new paths in every direction. We felt we would try and test everything and no achievement seemed impossible. We wrote, we sang, we acted, we poured ourselves out on every side." [2] In the second place, he had long been deeply impressed by a volume of Moore's "Irish Melodies," from which his literary companion, Akṣay Chaudhurī frequently used to recite passages to him. He did not, however, hear any of these melodies sung by English artistes until he came to England. In the third place,

[1] Mr. Ernest Rhys tells us that at the very early age of fourteen or fifteen Rabindra Nāth wrote a play for an amateur dramatic company and himself took part in it. Possibly the play to which Mr. Rhys refers is *Vālmiki Pratibhā* which, however, can scarcely be regarded as having been written at a very early age. See *Rabīndra Nāth : A Biographical Study*, p. 79.

[2] *My Reminiscences*, New York ed., 1917, p. 198.

as he entered more and more into the spirit of European music, he conceived the desire to free Indian music from its classical severity and harness Indian melodies to the service of the drama, by giving them freedom of movement and variety of form. He was quite aware of the fundamental differences between Indian and European music. He knew that with Indian music it was not a mere question of correctly rendering a melody in the way it is composed, but of subjecting the theme to an improvised method of interpretation. Still, he wanted to make an experiment and break fresh ground. As he remarked afterwards: "In the riotous joy of revolutionary activity were those two musical plays (*Vālmiki Pratibhā* and *Kāl Mṛgayā* which followed it) composed, and so they danced merrily to every measure, whether or not technically correct, indifferent as to the tunes being home-like or foreign . . . It is curious to find that the daring with which I had played havoc with accepted musical notions did not arouse any resentment; on the contrary, those who came to hear departed pleased." [1] Some of the lyrics and parts of the libretto of *Vālmiki Pratibhā* were written by Rabīndra Nāth's third brother, Jyotirindra Nāth Tagore, and a few of Akṣay Chaudhurī's compositions and several adaptations from Biharī Lāl Chakrabarti's song-cycle of *Sāradā Maṅgal* also found place in it. Two English tunes were used for the songs of Vālmiki's robber-band, and an Irish melody for the lament of the Wood-Fairies, who served as the chorus of the play. Most of the music was of the classical Indian type, but treated with great freedom and intermixed with European elements, which made it impossible to represent the score according to the orthodox Indian notations. It was, therefore, necessary for the performers to learn the airs by heart as they had no written score to guide them. Curiously enough, though the play was musical throughout, it owed its success almost entirely to its being an acted drama. As the author himself explains: "*Vālmiki Pratibhā* is not a composition which will bear being read. Its significance is lost if it is not heard sung and seen acted. It is not what Europeans call an opera, but a little drama set to music. That is to say, it is not primarily

[1] *My Reminiscences*, New York ed., 1917, p. 197.

a musical composition. Very few of the songs are important or attractive by themselves ; they all serve merely as the musical text of the play." [1] The plot is taken from the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and is based on the life of the robber-chief Vālmiki who, on witnessing the grief of a crane weeping over its mate killed by a hunter, broke out into a metrical lament which inspired him to compose his epic on the pattern of the metre that so came to him. The play was composed for an entertainment at one of the literary gatherings at the poet's house in Calcutta. He himself played the rôle of Vālmiki, and his niece that of Sarasvatī, the Goddess of Learning.

Encouraged by the success of this play, he wrote a second musical play called *Kāl Mṛgayā* (The Fateful Hunt). The story was derived from the *Mahābhārata*, and dealt with the episode of the Kaurava King Dhṛtarāṣṭra's accidental killing of a blind hermit's only son, which brought upon him the curse of life-long blindness. It was performed before a select audience on a temporary stage erected on the roof-terrace of the poet's house. "Afterwards," the poet says, "much of it was, with slight changes, incorporated in the *Vālmiki Pratibhā*, and this play ceased to be separately published in my works." [2]

A long time afterwards, he wrote a third musical play, called *Māyār Khelā* (The Play of Illusion). It was quite different from the two previous musical dramas. As the author says : "In this the songs were important, not the drama. In the others, a series of dramatic situations were strung on a thread of melody ; this was a garland of songs with just a thread of dramatic plot running through. The play of feeling, and not action, was its special feature. In point of fact, I was, while composing it, saturated with the mood of song." [3] The theme of the play, a tragedy of errors, was later amplified into a short prose-drama called *Nalinī*, which is no longer in print. The heroine, Nalinī, is in love with Nīrad but never tells him. Nīrad marries another woman named Nīrajā. When Nīrajā learns of Nalinī's love for her husband, she kills herself in her desire for her husband's happiness. But Nalinī refuses Nīrad and later, when she finds that he has gone back to a former forsaken love,

[1] *My Reminiscences*, p. 194. [2] *Ibid.*, p. 196. [3] *Ibid.*, p. 196.

she repents her rejection of him. These early attempts at play-writing are important so far as they point out the direction in which his dramatic work was to develop later. It is really the lyrical and musical qualities of the drama which have always impressed him more than anything else and he has gone on developing them consistently, and very often even at the sacrifice of much that is needed to make a play suitable for the modern stage.

Prakṛtir Pratiśodh[1] (Nature's Revenge), translated into English under the title *Sanyāsī* (The Ascetic), is Rabīndra Nāth's most important dramatic work after his first two musical plays of the early period. It was probably written sometime in 1883, while he was spending a short holiday by the sea-side at Karwar on the Western Indian coast. It is a dramatic poem, written in blank verse. The protagonist of the play is an ascetic who shuts himself out from the world, striving to gain a victory over Nature by cutting off the bond of all human affections and desires, hoping thereby to attain the path of perfection and self-mastery. As the curtain rises, we discover him sitting outside a cave, contemplating the nature of the universe and "chanting the incantation of nothingness."[2] The world has been very cruel to him, and so he has taken the vow that he would have nothing to do with it. He exults in the idea that he has been able to conquer it completely. Next we find him sitting by the way-side and watching the crowd. A village-elder and two women appear. The old man says, "Fools there are who judge men by their outside," and one of the women replies, "How sad! We have been watching your outside from infancy. It's just the same through all these years," to which the old villager answers, "Yes, like the morning sun." Then comes a band of quarrelsome villagers, followed by two students engaged in an academic discussion. They

[1] The play was performed some time ago in China at the Summer Theatre by the Sausi Tayuanfu School of Foreign Languages. See *The Modern Review*, April, 1925, pp. 383–92.

[2] In quoting from those of Rabīndra Nāth Tagore's plays which have been translated into English by the author himself or by others with his approval, the authorized translation has generally been followed, but in a few instances slight modifications have been made when this has seemed necessary in order to bring out more clearly the force of the original.

question the Sanyāsī as to which is the original—the subtle or the gross ? The Sanyāsī says, " Neither, the origin is the end, and the end is the origin. It's a cycle." Two flower-girls, with garlands in their hands, enter singing and wait for their lovers. Then comes an old beggar, followed by a soldier, who rebukes him for not making way for the minister's son, who is approaching. As these different scenes of common, normal life unfold before his eyes, the Sanyāsī ponders : " The earth breathes hot sighs and the whirling sands dance by. What sights of man have I seen ! Can I ever again shrink back into the smallness of these creatures and become one of them ? No, I am free. I have not this obstacle, this world around me. I live in pure desolation." At this point Bāsantī, the daughter of the out-cast cobbler, Raghu, appears and a village woman scolds her for having touched her. Bāsantī protests : " No, certainly not. Your skirt never touched me." A stranger appears. Bāsantī offers him hospitality which he sternly refuses. Now some villagers come in, carrying a bed in which the weaver, Binde, sleeps as if dead. Binde suddenly gets up and protests that he must not be cremated. But the others pretend not to believe him and tell him that he must keep quiet and behave like all decent dead people. Binde swears, " Upon my beard, brothers, I am as alive as any of you." But they take him away laughing. Everybody has left. Bāsantī has fallen asleep and the Sanyāsī dares not leave her alone on the roadside. A young woman now appears with several men who make love to her but she repels them saying that all men have hearts of stone. Bāsantī wakes up and talks to the Sanyāsī and tells him how beautiful life is. The Sanyāsī cries out : " No, no, the beautiful is mere phantasy. To him who knows, the dust and the flower are the same." The Sanyāsī runs away from her, goes and sits upon a stone in a mountain road. A shepherd boy passes singing : " Do not turn your face, my love. The spring has bared open its breast. The flowers breathe their secrets in the dark. The rustle of the forest leaves comes across the sky, like the sobs of the night. Come, love, show me your face." Shepherd girls pass by singing : " The music comes across the dark river and calls me. I was in the house and happy. But the flute

sounded in the still air of night and a pain pierced my heart. Oh, tell me the way, ye who know it, tell me the way to him." The evening breaks upon the Sanyāsī with a flood of crimson glory. He thinks of the little girl from whom he has escaped. He feels now as if she had brought him back from his contemplation of the infinite to the real, actual world and bound him again by a tie of human affection. Another girl in tattered garments appears and asks him if he has seen her father, who is a woodcutter. The Sanyāsī feels compassion for her and says : " Let me give you my kiss of blessing before you go." A mother appears with two children and the Sanyāsī becomes interested in her talk of her own domestic affairs. Two friends enter and take farewell of each other as they part in different directions. The Sanyāsī is now completely moved by all these tender scenes of life in reality and goes back to the village to enquire for the girl from whom he tore himself away so cruelly. He meets villagers of every description who ask him for his blessing, but he feels that they are mocking him. He protests that he is no holy man but is only a seeker of a lost world. He asks for Raghu's daughter, Bāsantī and he is told that she is dead. He refuses to believe it. So ends the play.

The Sanyāsī, like Paracelsus, failed in his search for perfection because he ignored love. To win knowledge, he, like the alchemist, flung away the joys of youth, and when the girl who had awakened beauty and love in him, dies, he realizes what he has lost. Paracelsus sought knowledge not for himself but " to elevate the human race," and dying, thought of his fellow-beings, but the Sanyāsī is a selfish egoist. He had been vainly seeking an abstraction, and thrown away the substance. But when his vanity is wounded and his pride is humbled, he has this consolation that he has been led " from the unreal to the real." In the words of the author, he has discovered that " the great is to be found in the small, the Infinite within the bounds of form and the eternal freedom of the soul in love. It is only in the light of love that all limits are merged in the limitless." [1]

In his *Reminiscences* Rabīndra Nāth has devoted a whole chapter

[1] *My Reminiscences*, pp. 238–9.

to the explanation of the meaning of this play and one paragraph is well worth quoting here in full: "Nature took the Sanyāsī to the presence of the Infinite, enthroned in the finite, by the pathway of the heart. In *Nature's Revenge* there were shown on the one side the wayfarers and the villagers, content with their home-made triviality and unconscious of anything beyond; and on the other, the Sanyāsī busy casting away his all and himself into the self-evolved Infinite of his imagination. When love bridged the gulf between the two, and the hermit and the householder met, the seeming triviality of the finite and the seeming emptiness of the Infinite alike disappeared. This was to put in a slightly different form the story of my own experience, of the entrancing ray of light which found its way into the depths of the cave into which I had retired away from all touch with the outside world and made me more fully one with Nature again. This *Nature's Revenge* may be looked upon as an introduction to the whole of my literary work; or rather this has been the subject on which all my writings have dwelt—the joy of attaining the Infinite within the finite."[1] It is, therefore, evident from this what an important place this play occupies in the evolution not only of the dramatic genius of Rabīndra Nāth but also of his whole spiritual and mental outlook. This as the true basis of life's freedom and happiness is the fundamental theme of all his creative art. This theme again is closely associated with all his æsthetic doctrine of the super-sensuous, which is that it is futile to suppress legitimate passions and emotions, and that a vow which is too strong is a tie which inevitably sooner or later snaps and defeats its own purpose. "Illusions," as he says in a poem in *Gītāñjali*, "will burn into the illumination of joy" and "desires ripen into fruits of love." He points out the foolishness of other-worldliness and the meaningless mortification of the flesh. He asks: "Deliverance? Where is this deliverance to be found? Our Master himself has joyfully taken upon himself the bonds of creation; He is bound with us all for ever." He calls everybody to "leave this chanting and singing and telling of beads! . . . Put off thy holy mantle and . . . come down on the dusty soil." He puts his belief most succinctly in the following verse:

[1] *My Reminiscences*, pp. 239–40.

" Deliverance is not for me in renunciation. I feel the embrace of freedom in a thousand bonds of delight." [1]

Rājā O Rāṇī (The King and The Queen) brings us down to 1890. It has for its theme the futility of selfish and ego-centric love. The King, Vikrama. neglects his royal duties in his passionate attachment to his Queen, who remonstrates : " King, if you thriftlessly squander your all upon mc, then I shall be deprived . . . I have place in your hcart as your beloved, and in your world as your Queen." [2] The King says : " The King and the Queen ? Mere words, we are more than that ; we are lovers." The Queen begs him to attend to his work. Thc kingdom is invaded in consequence of his negligence and the people die of hunger. The Queen begs the King to fight his foes, and rebukes him saying, " Do not wreck your manhood against a woman's charm," to which he replies, " I know my power. Therc is an unconquerable force in my nature which I have turned into love for you." He refuses to fight. The Queen leaves the place and goes to seek the aid of her brother, Kumār Sen, to defend her husband's kingdom. Feeling it an insult that help should come from outside, the King goes to the war himself and crushes his enemies. With wounded pride, he thinks of taking vengeance on his Queen : " Revenge is stronger than the thin wine of love. Revenge is freedom, freedom from the coils of cloying sweetness." He carries war into Kashmir, the territory of the Queen's brother and waits in his tent victorious. The Queen sceks an audiencc of the King, which is thrice refused. His General plcads with him on thc Queen's behalf, but he remains inexorable and says : " This is neither the time nor the placc to sce a woman." Śaṅkar, the attcndant of Kumār Sen, asks the King if it is " king-like or man-like to magnify a domestic quarrcl into a war, carrying it from country to country." " I warn you, old man," says the King, " Your tongue is bccoming dangerous. You may tell the Queen that when her brother Kumār Scn owns defeat and surrenders himself into our hands, the question of a pardon will be discussed."

[1] See *Gītāñjali*, Poem No. 73.

[2] The quotations from *Rājā O Rāṇī* are taken from the poet's own English version of the play. This play forms the substantial material of his very latest production, entitled *Tapatī* (The Ascetic Queen).

Amaru, a mountain chieftain, offers his daughter, Ilā, in marriage to the King as a token of victory. Ilā tells the King that she loves Kumār Sen and wishes to be released and also that Kumār Sen be spared his life for her sake. The King cries out: "Love him, love him with all you have . . . I have lost my love's heaven myself, but let me have the happiness to make you happy. I will not covet your love. The withered branch cannot blossom with borrowed flowers. Trust me. I am your friend, I will bring him to you." He asks her to prepare for the wedding. Kumār Sen might bear the King's vengeance but not his generosity, and so sends him his head, which the Queen presents the king on a tray. The Queen falls and dies. Ilā enters dressed as a bride, saying, "King, I hear the bridal music. Where is my lover? I am ready."

Bisarjan (Sacrifice) followed *Rājā O Rāṇī*, and is, according to Mr. E. J. Thompson, the greatest drama in Bengali literature.[1] The theme of the play had already been dealt with in a novel of an earlier period called *Rājarṣi* (The Royal Saint). It is based on the popular Hindu ritual of the sacrifice of blood before the goddess Kālī and the superstitions of the Chaṇḍi-cult. The tragedy arises out of the conflict between the king and his priest, Raghupati, on the question of blood-sacrifices. The childless Queen Guṇavatī is preparing the sacrifice of a goat to propitiate the goddess and to induce her to grant her a child. The King appears at the moment with Aparṇā, a beggar-girl, and asks the temple-keeper, Jay Siṁha, if it is true that the poor girl's pet goat has been taken away by force to be killed. Jay Siṁha does not know, but he says to the girl, "But my child, why is this weeping? Is it worthy of you to shed tears for that which the Mother herself has taken," to which Aparṇā replies, "You speak of the Mother! I am the goat's mother. If I am late returning to my hut, he refuses his grass and bleats, with his eyes on the road. I take him up in my arms when I come and share my food with him. He knows no mother but me. The Mother has taken him? It is a lie. Not a mother, but a demon!" The King is very much touched by her words and forbids the shedding of blood in the temple. Raghupati warns

[1] *Rabīndra Nāth*, p. 25.

the King and challenges his power to disobey the laws laid down in the scriptures. Raghupati declares that he, being a Brāhmaṇ, is the custodian of the temple and that sacrifice must continue. But the Queen's proffered sacrifice is by royal order turned back from the temple. The Queen quarrels with the King and goes to Raghupati to ask for his help, but Raghupati refuses to do anything until his rights as a Brāhmaṇ have been restored. The Queen comes back and begs the King to permit the offering, but the King refuses, saying : " It is not the Brāhmaṇ's right to violate the eternal good. A creature's blood is not an offering for the gods. And it is within the rights of the king and peasant alike to maintain truth and righteousness." Raghupati makes a fruitless attempt to incite the Commander of the army against the King and is determined to have the sacrifice performed. But the King comes with his soldiers and stops it. The Brāhmaṇ becomes violently angry and goes to Nakṣatra Rāy, the King's brother, and tells him that the goddess has asked for royal blood and if he would kill the King secretly and offer his life as a sacrifice, he shall himself be made the King. Nakṣatra Rāy at first refuses, but is cajoled into making a promise. But Jay Siṁha, the temple-keeper (who is himself a member of the royal family) will not have a brother kill his brother, and assures Raghupati that he is going to bring the King's blood. When in the evening the unarmed King enters the temple to offer prayers to the goddess, Jay Siṁha appears and addresses the image asking if she really desires royal blood and a voice replies in the affirmative. So he bids the King to prepare for death, but the King tells him that it is not the voice of the Mother Kālī but the voice of Raghupati that he has heard. Jay Siṁha throws away his knife and cries out, " Listen to the cry of thy children, Mother. Let there be only flowers, the beautiful flowers for thy offering—no more blood. They are red even as blood—these bunches of hibiscus. They have come out of the heart-burst of the earth, pained at the slaughter of her children. Accept these . . . Blood thou shalt never have . . . King, leave this temple to its goddess and go back to your people." Raghupati rebukes Jay Siṁha for having failed in his duty and makes him promise before

the altar to bring royal blood before midnight at any cost. The Queen being repeatedly thwarted by the King tries to avenge herself on him by conspiring with Nakṣatra Rāy and Raghupati to kill a boy who is the King's protégé and offer him as a sacrifice. But the King discovers the plot, rebukes the Queen, punishes his brother and grants Raghupati a day's respite before he is sent into exile. At night in the temple, Raghupati, shamed and disgraced, soliloquises before the goddess, and when Jay Siṁha comes in, asks him if he has brought the blood. Jay Siṁha stabs himself and dies, offering his royal blood for the sacrifice. Aparṇā, who loved Jay Siṁha, now enters the temple and finding him dead, curses the goddess. Raghupati, in his remorse at the death of Jay Siṁha, throws away the image. The Queen Guṇavati comes and asks the priest where the goddess has gone. "She is nowhere," answers Raghupati, "neither above nor below." "Don't torture me. Tell me truly—Is there no goddess?" asks Guṇavati. Raghupati replies, "No, there is none." Guṇavati asks again, "Then, who was there?" to which Raghupati replies, "Nothing, nothing." Guṇavati says to the King, "The goddess is no more." The King says, "She has burst her cruel prison of stone and come back to the woman's heart." The tender cry of Aparṇā, asking Raghupati to leave the temple and come away, reaches our ears as the curtain falls.

Mālinī, like its predecessor *Bisarjan*, deals with another aspect of popular Hinduism and shows that bigoted orthodoxy carries its own destruction within itself and that fanatical faith is not true devotion. It is the woman in this play as in *Prakṛtir Pratiśodh*, who brings home the truth that true religion is love. Mālinī is that simple little girl of *Prakṛtir Pratiśodh*, who has, as it were, developed into the heroine of this play. She is the King's daughter who hates the barriers of wealth and chooses to follow the simple religion of humanity, divested of all creeds and dogmas. Her language is simple as her heart is pure. Although she has lived in the confines of the royal palace, her spiritual teaching has spread through the length and breadth of Benares and become known to the people. Of course, this spells disaster and the Brāhmaṇs of the land declare her to be a

heretic for not observing the traditional religion of her race. They demand that the King should banish her. Mālinī herself also feels that it is her destiny to go out into the world and spread her religion far and wide. The play opens at sunset in the balcony of the royal palace where the Queen finds Mālinī alone and rebukes her for her unorthodox views and utter disregard of wealth and royalty. The King enters with the news that the Brāhmaṇs are in open revolt and clamouring for the banishment of Mālinī. She begs her father to banish her. The royal family withdraw into the inner apartments and a crowd of angry Brāhmaṇs, led by Kṣemaṅkar, shout for audience with the King. Kṣemaṅkar's friend Supriya refuses to join in their demands. A Brāhmaṇ enters with the news that the King's army has joined the revolt. The Brāhmaṇs are, however, unwilling to use force and decide to make prayer their weapon and invoke the presiding goddess of their land to appear and to help them in their cause. Just at this moment Mālinī appears, and is hailed by all as their goddess and, even after they recognize who she is, they go out with her, rejoicing in a religious ecstacy. Supriya tries to follow Mālinī but is restrained by Kṣemaṅkar, and is implored by him not to follow her but to remain true to orthodoxy. Supriya is persuaded to remain behind and Kṣemaṅkar tells him that he is going away to foreign lands to bring an army that will destroy the heretical Princess. The Queen does not know that Mālinī has secretly left the palace and suspects that the Brāhmaṇs have stolen her and begs the King to punish them. But soon Mālinī comes back, followed by the crowd amidst shouts of rejoicing. The King is amazed at this sudden conversion of the people. Mālinī, now tired and weary, finds solace in the arms of her mother who sings her to sleep. Later in the play we find that Supriya, having become a devoted follower of Mālinī, has betrayed Kṣemaṅkar to the King and Kṣemaṅkar has been made a prisoner. The King offers to Supriya Mālinī in marriage as a reward. Both beg the King to save Kṣemaṅkar's life. Kṣemaṅkar refuses pardon and desires to see Supriya before he dies. The friends meet. Kṣemaṅkar says to Supriya, " Then, come to my heart. You have wandered far away from your comrade in the infinite distance ; now, dear friend, come eternally close to me and accept from one who loves

you the gift of death," and strikes Supriya with his chains. Supriya falls dead. The King, rising up, asks for his sword to kill Kṣemaṅkar, but Mālinī begs the King to forgive him.

On the 9th April, 1918, *Mālinī* was successfully produced in Madras by an amateur dramatic company of Europeans and Indians at the Victoria Town Hall. A song for the Queen at the end of the first act was especially composed for the play by the poet, Harīndra Nāth Chaṭṭopādhyāy. A musical programme with selections from Sarojini Nāidu, Grieg, Swinburne and Schumann was included in the performance.

About 1892, Rabīndra Nāth wrote *Chitrā*, a lyrical drama based on a Paurāṇic theme. Mr. E. J. Thompson describes it as "one of the summits of his work, unsurpassed and unsurpassable in its kind." [1] This play is really a very wonderful piece of work, as beautiful in its thought as in its expression. In the sheer beauty of its blank verse it is simply marvellous and it was one of the last works in which he treated blank verse to such perfection. It was printed in English in 1919 and proposals for its production in English having been made, the author inserted directions for stage setting, although in its original Bengali form he had always had it performed without scenery. Chitrā or Chitrāṅgadā is the daughter and only child of Chitrabāhana, the King of Maṇipur, who has brought her up as a boy. In the course of his wanderings in fulfilment of a vow of penance, Arjuna, the Pāṇḍava hero, came to Maṇipur. There he met Chitrā, fell in love with her and asked the King for the hand of his daughter in marriage. The King consented on condition that a son must be born of their marriage for the perpetuation of his race. When the play opens, we discover Chitrā conferring with Madana, the god of love and Basanta, the god of spring and telling them how while wandering in pursuit of a deer along the river bank she had caught sight of a man lying on a bed of leaves (who, of course, is none but Arjuna) and instantly felt conscious that she was a woman, for the first time in her life. She remembered that Arjuna had taken the vow of celibacy and that she had always wished, in her male disguise, to challenge the Pāṇḍava warrior to single combat. But next morning she had lain aside her man's

[1] See *Rabīndra Nāth*, p. 24.

clothing and hastened to find Arjuna in the temple of Śiva. She implored the god of spring to give her "but one brief day of perfect beauty" and make her "superbly beautiful, even as beautiful as the sudden blooming of love" in her heart. Her prayer is granted, and Arjuna also is smitten with love for Chitrā by the spell which the god of love casts over him. When at last they meet, Chitrā tells Arjuna that their love is not for home. "Not for home?" asks Arjuna. "No," says Chitrā, "Never talk of that. Take to your home that which is abiding and strong. Leave the little wild-flower where it was born; leave it beautifully to die at the day's end among all the fading blossoms and decaying leaves. Do not take it to your palace hall to fling it on the stony floor which knows no pity for things that fade and are forgotten." Arjuna asks again, "Is ours that kind of love?" "Yes, no other," answers Chitrā softly, "Why regret it? That which was meant for idle days should never outlive them . . . Take it and keep it as long as it lasts . . . The day is done. Put this garland on. I am tired. Take me in your arms, my love." The twilight steals on the silent faces of the two lovers and the sound of prayer-bells from the distant village-temple comes wafted on the evening breeze. Thus this beautiful love-idyl is enveloped in beauty and sweetness as the story follows the course of events already narrated. When the time has come for the lovers to separate, they have no regrets, for life has given them all it has to give. When *Chitrā* was first published, it was condemned by critics as "sensuous," but it is difficult to say whether the criticism was quite just. The play contains such a beautiful situation and is so artistically worked out that it should only be taken for what it is worth and enjoyed, and left at that. Yet, what else could be expected of the author at a period when he was writing *Kaṛi O Komal* (Sharps and Flats), those charming lyrics full of the warmth of youthful passion and longings for love? If any play contains the very essence of Tagore's sense of beauty, it is *Chitrā*. It throbs with all the most tender emotions that love's meeting and parting awake in the human breast.

Chitrā, as we have already stated, was one of the last of the poet's dramas to be written in blank verse. During the

next period of his work, roughly from 1893 to 1904, he experimented with a type of dramatic dialogue, written in rhymed couplets, which he conceived to be a more appropriate medium for a short narrative piece than the grander and more severe blank verse form. The first, and in some ways the most remarkable, and certainly the best of these rhymed dramatic dialogues was *Bidāy-Abhiśāp* (The Curse at Farewell), presumably written during the autumn of 1893, and translated into English by Mr. E. J. Thompson and first published in 1924. In the *Mahābhārata* we have a story of the conflict between the gods and the Titans (Asuras) in which the slain and wounded on the side of the Titans are healed by Śukra, the preceptor of the Titans. Kach, the son of Bṛhaṣpati, the preceptor of the gods, is sent to Śukra as a pupil to acquire from him a knowledge of the healing art. Tagore begins his play with the scene in which Kach having completed a course of a thousand years' study at the hermitage of Śukra, is taking leave of Devayānī, the daughter of Śukra. Devayānī offers him love and asks him to stay, since if he keeps his knowledge and refuses love, the knowledge must be useless. Kach rejects her proffered love, and Devayānī says :

> " My life's whole glory there
> Lies rolled in dust. Then go ! But, going bear
> My curse with you—the knowledge for whose sake
> You scorn me, never, never shall you make
> Your own ! Mechanic porter, you shall bring
> This gift to others, knowing it a thing
> You may not use. Never shall you employ
> The art you teach—shall give, but not enjoy." [1]

The main interest in the play lies in the exquisite modernization of a traditional story without at the same time depriving it of the glamour and beauty of the legendary world. The atmosphere is Indian in its minutest shades of colour and light ; the poet's description of the hermitage, of the seasons and the life of Kach as a student, is reminiscent of the original fable. But the

[1] *The Curse at Farewell*, translated by Mr. Edward Thompson, pp. 47–8.

dramatic conflict between love and knowledge, between the different ways in which a man and a woman confront some of the deepest problems of human life, is Rabīndra Nāth's own creation. Mr. Thompson takes exception to the "curse" as a weakness in the drama and even considers it as "a bad anti-climax" [1] but it is perfectly obvious that it is on the "curse" itself that the central motive of the drama rests. The "curse," apart from its implications in the original story, is only the culmination of the natural wounded pride of a woman's heart and of a man's pious and smug disinterestedness and impudence. The last words of Kach in which he, though the wrong-doer, expresses a kind of disinterested generosity by his forgiveness of Devayānī's curse, may be taken as Rabīndra Nāth's ironic comment on his character. The whole situation is so tense and concentrated and is described with such lyrical beauty that it grips one's mind completely. The climax might have been tragic if the story had been developed a little further, but the poet has chosen to leave it where it is, at the same time suggesting to us quite definitely on which side his sympathies lie.

The other dramatic dialogues which do not call for such extended treatment are *Gāndhārīr Prārthanā* (written probably in 1897, an English translation of which appeared under the title, *A Mother's Prayer*, in the *Modern Review* of June, 1919), *Lakṣmīr Parikṣā* (The Testing of Lakṣmī) and *Karṇa O Kuntī*. Like *Biday-Abhisap*, all three are based on Paurānic themes and completed in one single act. *Gāndhārīr Prārthanā* contains only three characters. Dhṛtarāṣṭra, the blind Kaurava King, his son, Duryyodhana, who has just succeeded in defeating by deceitful means his cousin in a game of dice and so procured the banishment of the Pāṇḍavas, and Queen Gāndhārī, the mother of Duryyodhana. The conflict lies between Dhṛtarāṣṭra's espousing of the unholy cause of Duryyodhana, and Gāndhārī's stern sense of justice which transcends mother-love and refuses to participate in the unjust machinations of her ambitious and crafty son. In *Lakṣmīr Parikṣā* we have the story of the gift of the goddess Lakṣmī, conferred on Kṣīri, the ambitious

[1] *The Curse at Farewell*, translated by Mr. Edward Thompson, pp. 13–14.

maidservant of a generous Queen, by means of which she becomes the queen herself. Raised to power, she spurns the goddess and awakes out of a dream to find that she has reverted to the old position that she is fit for, and has to accept her fate without complaint. In *Karṇa O Kuntī*, Rabīndra Nāth converts an old episode from the *Mahābhārata* into a very suitable dramatic situation. Karṇa is the unacknowledged son of the Pāṇḍava Queen Kuntī, the mother of the five Pāṇḍavas. Deprived of his birth-right years before, Karṇa threw in his lot with the Kauravas. On the eve of the Kurukṣetra battle, Kuntī tries to win him over on the Pāṇḍava side. The play ends by showing how impossible it is for Karṇa to bridge over the gulf between the life which he has chosen and the life that should have been his, had his mother willed it so.

CHAPTER XXVIII

His Symbolical Dramas

Before we attempt to discuss the exact nature and meaning of the symbolism of Rabīndra Nāth it would be well to analyse his symbolical dramas themselves in the order of their appearance. There is quite an important lapse of time between the first of his symbolical dramas and the small dramatic dialogues of the period between 1893 and 1904. In 1905, the Svadesī movement came and threw Rabīndra Nāth into the political field. From the very beginning his political attitude has been a little puzzling both to his countrymen and to the British Government. Just on the one hand, he has severely criticised his countrymen for their indifference to fundamental problems of political and social reform, so, on the other, he has condemned the British rulers for their apathy, lack of understanding and errors of administration. But the most important and vital change that came to him before he began to write the symbolical plays, was not a political but a religious change. Indirectly it was the result of his violent disillusionment with the existing conditions of Bengali life and thought. Art merely for art's sake, which had pleased his youthful fancies in the days of literary apprenticeship, could no longer satisfy him. He began to develop a philosophy of life which was to reflect later in his plays of the symbolical type. The doctrine of *Jīban-Debatā* or *Life-Spirit*—the immanence of the universal all-abiding God in the created universe—which was implicit in the earlier poems of *Sonār Tarī* (The Golden Boat), emerged into full expression in some of the poems of *Gītāñjali*. It should be clearly understood that Tagore's specific philosophy of life was in the process of gradual development out of the romantic pantheism of a young poet in its different phases, his constant longing to get into touch with the mysteries of the unknown world in all its endless moods and expressions, and further out of his strong and vigorous youthful attempt to break

all boundaries and the barriers of race and nationalism and shatter all narrowness and sectarianism. This philosophy first began to flow into his verse in amazing fecundity, thus investing everything he wrote with a kind of religious mysticism. This mysticism combined with his ever-present poetic joy in all forms of natural beauty lent a wistful charm to the exquisite rendering in poetry and drama of his dominant spiritual aspirations and ideas. Side by side with this religious transition, he launched into educational enterprises and founded his school at Śāntiniketan in 1901. And as soon as his period of political activity was over, he finally retired to Śāntiniketan and devoted himself almost completely to literary work. To this period of retirement belong most of his symbolical dramas.

Śāradotsab (Autumn Festival), the first of his symbolical plays, was written in 1908, and in its English form, first appeared in the *Modern Review* of November, 1919. It is a play of the open air and is saturated with the spirit and atmosphere of the Indian autumn. The scene is laid in a forest near the Betasinī River. Lakṣeśvar is a money-lender and usurer, and a boy, Upānanda, as the chattel of Lakṣeśvar, slaves day and night to pay him off the debts incurred by his former master, Sura Sen, the Bīna-player, who is now dead. The Emperor Bijayāditya comes out in disguise, dressed as a Sanyāsī, to join his people in their autumn-festival. The boys of the village have gathered round Ṭhākurdādā, the " grandfather," as they call him, to celebrate the holiday. They sing :

Oh, we won't go indoors to-day, brothers, we won't go indoors,
Oh, we'll burgle the sky and plunder the out-of-doors,
There is a ripple of laughter on the breeze, like foam-flakes on the waters of the flood-tide :
Our whole day shall pass in idly playing on the flute.

Noticing the Sanyāsī, the boys want to have a game with him, pretending to be his followers. But the Sanyāsī will have none of that, for he has flung away his holiness for this day and set aside his scriptures to join them on the occasion. The boys find Upānanda copying manuscripts to pay his late master's debts to Lakṣeśvar and invite him to join them and become their leader. But seeing Lakṣeśvar approach, they take to their heels. Lakṣeśvar suspects that the Sanyāsī has come to help Upānanda and rebukes him. On Ṭhākurdādā's intervention, Lakṣeśvar offers apologies

and hospitality to the Sanyāsī, fearing lest the holy man should curse him for having slighted him. Upānanda approaches the Sanyāsī and asks if he could tell him whether he might sell himself to the Emperor to pay off the debts he owes to Lakṣeśvar. The Sanyāsī assures the boy that the Emperor may possibly accept him, but before that happens he must cheerfully take up his burden and work to pay off his debts bit by bit. Lakṣeśvar is terribly afraid that the Emperor must have got scent of his hoarded wealth and already sent emissaries to take it away from him. So he surrenders himself to the Sanyāsī and begs for his protection against the Emperor. From now he suspects every villager he meets and is haunted by the fear of impending ruin. He hears that the Emperor's army is approaching the town and decides to take the line of least resistance. He dresses up as a hermit and hands over to the Sanyāsī all his jewel caskets and asks to be his disciple. A feudatory king comes and tells the Sanyāsī that he is going to rebel against the Emperor. At this very moment, some courtiers and ministers suddenly appear and hail the Sanyāsī as the Emperor himself. Everybody is surprised. Lakṣeśvar says: "I surrendered myself to the Sanyāsī to be saved from the Emperor, but I do not know in whose hands I am now." The Emperor forgives the rebellious king, gives Upānanda the money for the payment of his debts, and says to Lakṣeśvar, "I have protected your jewels from the grasp of the Emperor. Now they are given back to you." Lakṣeśvar asks, "If the Emperor had given them back to me in secret I could have felt secure—who is to save them now?" The Sanyāsī says, "That is my business. But, Lakṣeśvar, something you still owe to me." Lakṣeśvar (aside): "Curse me! I knew it would come at last." Sanyāsī: "You wanted to give me alms. You owe me a handful of rice. Do you think you will be able to fill an Emperor's hand?" Lakṣeśvar: "But, Sire, it was a Sanyāsī's hand which gave me courage to propose what I did." Sanyāsī: "Then I free you from your promise." Lakṣeśvar: "With the Mahārājā's leave I take my departure. Everybody's eyes seem to be turned upon these caskets." (He goes.) Now the boys enter and join Ṭhākurdādā amidst rejoicings. The Emperor dismisses his courtiers and sends everybody back to the festival.

The play may be regarded as an allegory, cast in a dramatic form. But it really matters little what the inner meaning of the allegory is, because in its outward form it is sufficiently intelligible. Upānanda may be taken to be the spirit of the autumn, who, like the autumn itself, pays off the debt he owes to the spring of joy by a sacrifice through sorrow, because he knows that it is sorrow alone that chastens humanity. The poet makes this idea very clear in the following conversation between the Sanyāsī and Ṭhākurdādā :

SANYĀSĪ : I know why this world is so beautiful—simply because it is ever paying back its debt. The rice-field has done its utmost to earn its fulfilment and the Betasinī River is what it is because it keeps nothing back.

ṬHĀKURDĀDĀ : I understand, father. There is One who has given himself in creation in abundance of joy, and creation is every moment working to repay the gift and this perpetual sacrifice is blossoming everywhere in beauty and life.

SANYĀSĪ : Wherever there is sluggishness, there accumulates debt and there it is ugly.

ṬHĀKURDĀDĀ : Because where there is something lacking in the gift, the harmony is broken in the eternal rhythm of payment and re-payment.

In a magazine-article entitled *Āmār Dharma* (My Religion), published in *Sabuj Patra* (The Green Leaf),[1] the poet made an attempt to explain the underlying idea of this play as follows : " The whole world is doing a penance of sorrow. The gift it has got from the Endless One, that it is exhausting by the sorrows of endless striving. Every blade of grass expresses itself by its own individual effort and by this very effort it pays off the debt it owes to the truth of its own hidden inner being. This offering of the self in suffering, this grief, is its true beauty, its true festival. It is all this that is made beautiful and full of joy by autumn. The soul's self-expression is pure bliss, that is why it can face sorrow and death. He who evades the path of sorrow through fear, idleness or doubt, deprives himself of that bliss. So this is the inner meaning of *Śāradotsab*—it is not a mere matter of piping tunes to others as one sits comfortably under the shade of a tree."[2]

[1] A Bengali monthly, edited by Mr. P. Chaudhurī, Bar.-at-law. See Nos. 6 and 7 (4th Year), 1324 B.S., p. 393 ff. [2] See *Āmār Dharma*, p. 394.

Rājā (The King of the Dark Chamber), written in 1910, is perhaps the most mysterious and subtle of Rabīndra Nāth's symbolical plays. A certain strange and weird beauty pervades the whole story and a sense of mystical remoteness grows upon the mind as the play slowly advances to its conclusion. It starts with the idle gossip of a handful of citizens and wayfarers about the identity of the King who has kept himself in hiding. The curiosity deepens into intrigue, intrigue develops into strife, and when we reach the conclusion, we find ourselves even more deeply involved in the curiosity and mystery which started us on the search. Of course, we do arrive at some explanation of the secret meaning underlying this simple dramatic narrative, but we have the feeling of having travelled in a remote world of strange and mysterious people. One central idea runs through the play—the idea already foreshadowed in *Śāradotsab*—the idea of the realization of truth through suffering and sorrow. When the human longing for the unknown and unknowable is too restless, it only strains and warps the mind. It has to go through the ordeal of feverish excitement followed by despair, before the desired object is attainable. As the King's maid, Suraṅgamā, says in the play: "Curiosity will have to come back baffled, and in tears." The Queen Sudarsanā, in her mad longing to see her stern and relentless husband, the King of the Dark Chamber, gives her garland to a wrong king, then sinks into shame and sin, causes a war to be fought on her own account by seven rival kings, suffers mental conflict, and at last comes to know the truth. The play is a parable, setting forth Rabīndra's Nāth's philosophical doctrine of the emancipation of life from the bondage of lower sense through a process of struggle. The poet himself has said in another place: "The path of creation is through destruction. The things that our souls create have to face difficulties at every step. But if we speak of the process as merely a "pain" we do not tell the whole truth—for, it is through this very pain that beauty and bliss come." [1] So the main interest in the play does not spring from the mere psychological and human conflict produced by the forces set in motion, but from the immutable and unalterable

[1] See *Āmār Dharma* (My Religion), p. 394 ff.

laws of life which govern the conflict and carry it to its inevitable end. The meaning of the "Dark Chamber" and the strange hidden face is beautifully worked out and brought into harmony with the underlying idea. By way of illustration we may take the following passage :

SUDARSANĀ : Why do you not allow me to see you in the light ?

KING : So you want to see me in the midst of a thousand things in broad daylight ! Why should I not be the only thing you can feel in this darkness ?

SUDARSANĀ : But I must see you—I am longing to have a sight of you.

KING : You will not be able to bear the sight of me—it will only give you pain, poignant and overpowering.

SUDARSANĀ : How can I say that I shall be unable to bear the sight of you ? Oh, I can tell even here in the dark, how lovely and wonderful you are ; why should I be afraid of you in the light ? But tell me, can you see me in the dark ?

KING : Yes, I can.

SUDARSANĀ : What do you see ?

KING : I see that the darkness of the infinite heavens, whirled into life and being by the power of my love, has drawn the light of a myriad stars into itself and incarnated itself in a form of flesh and blood. And in that form, what aeons of thought and striving, what untold yearnings of limitless skies, what countless gifts of unnumbered seasons !

SUDARSANĀ : Am I really so wonderful, so beautiful ? When I hear you speak thus, my heart swells with gladness and pride. But how can I believe the wonderful things you tell me ? I cannot find them in myself.

KING : Your own mirror will not reflect them—it dwarfs you, limits you, makes you look small and insignificant. But could you see yourself mirrored in my own mind, how grand you would appear ! In my own heart you are no longer the ordinary person which you think you are—you are verily my second self.[1]

Here the dramatist lifts the veil of darkness for a while and lets us see what lies beyond the inscrutable destiny of hidden life and love. The earth-bound Queen cannot understand the mystery and begs the King to show her how to see as he sees and asks : "This darkness, which is to me real and strong as death—is this simply nothing to you ?" She wants him in real, tangible form, and to see him as she sees "trees, animals, birds and stones

[1] See *The King of the Dark Chamber*, New York ed., 1914, pp. 57–9.

and the earth." The King says that she may look for him this very night during the festival of the full moon of the spring from the high turret of the palace amongst the crowd of people. From her turret at night the Queen hears the song of the revellers : " My sorrow is sweet to me in this spring night " ; and she longs for love and her mind is filled with inexplicable forebodings. She says to herself : " A fancy comes to me that desire can never attain its object—it need never attain it." But she does not learn the lesson before she has made her tragic mistake, which costs her her honour, pride and virtue. But she pays the price and learns the truth. In her final surrender to the King (who may be taken symbolically to represent Truth or the Life-Spirit or God) she says : " Your love lives in me—you are mirrored in that love and you see your face reflected in me—nothing of this is mine, it is all yours, my Lord ! " It is impossible to convey in a limited space the philosophical implications of the problem which is presented in the play. It is a beautiful work of fancy in which the mystical imagination of the poet is charmingly blended with the most exquisite melody of speech.

Achalāyatan (The Immovable Sanctuary), not yet translated into English, and *Dāk Ghar*[1] (The Post Office), first published in English in 1914, are two short allegorical dramas which bear a real kinship to each other on account of a common underlying dramatic motive. The motive is the revolt of the human spirit against all that is gross and earthly in order that it may be truly free. In the former play the revolt is represented by a youth called Pañchak, who is in a school, walled around by a multitude of verses culled from the ancient scriptures and by numberless outworn creeds and superstitions. Pañchak wants to expand. He wants to express himself. He finds that the place where he lives is more prolific in negative prohibitions than in constructive principles. He represents the revolt of youth against the old (i.e. the teachers and preceptors of the school). He strikes against the barriers and becomes a liberator. The other play, *Dāk Ghar*, deals with the longing for freedom of Amal, a little boy who has been ill, confined to his room, and

[1] In 1913 *Dāk Ghar* was performed in London at the Court Theatre by the Irish Players, along with several plays of Synge.

not allowed to go outside. He sits at his window, questions everybody that passes by—the curd-seller, the watchman, the village headman, and the little flower-girl Sudhā. He wishes he could get up to that far-away hill he sees from his window. He would like to go about like that man with the bamboo staff on his shoulder with a small bundle at the top and a brass pot in his left hand, finding things to do. For how often he has dreamt that when everybody was asleep with their doors shut from the heat of the day, he would play truant, and tramp on and on, seeking work. He is tired of sitting and talking to strangers. He is hope's most pitiful prisoner. The watchman tells him that the big new house which he sees on the other side of the road with its flags flying high up is the Post Office and some fine day there may be a letter for him from the King. Amal hopes to be the King's postman some day when he grows up. The village headman is a great bully and damps the boy's spirit, but the flower-girl Sudhā encourages him with the promise of flowers when she comes back. A group of boys enter and invite him to join them in play, but how can he go out against the doctor's injunction? In course of time Amal becomes so ill that he is not allowed to go to the window any more. He asks the old Gaffer if there is to be a letter for him from the King to-night. The Gaffer comforts him and suggests that perhaps the letter is already on its way to him. Amal in imagination pictures the King's postman coming down the hill-side, lantern in his hand and a bag of letters on his back, "climbing down for ever so long; for days and nights." He can feel him "coming nearer and nearer." He feels quite happy and now does not mind being quiet and alone. The doctor comes and asks him if he feels well enough to leave his bed if the King should come in the middle of the night. Of course he is well enough, he says; he has been dying to be about for ever so long, and he will ask the King to find him the pole-star which he has so often looked for, though he cannot tell exactly which one it is. All is quiet now. The oil lamp is blown out for the star-light to stream in. Hush, Amal sleeps. His life's day is done. "When will he awake?", asks Sudhā, when she comes to give him the flowers she had promised to bring. The doctor replies, "Directly the King comes

and calls him." Not realizing that Amal is dead, Sudhā asks the doctor to whisper a word for her in Amal's ear when he wakes up and tell him she has not forgotten him.

It is difficult to judge either of these two plays by the ordinary rules of the stage, for they do not fulfil any of the conditions required by stagecraft in its accepted sense, nor does the dramatist make any pretentions of this sort. He has conceived them æsthetically and wants them to be understood æsthetically too. They are not dramas of circumstance. It is the permeating idea in them that matters, as in such European plays of this type as Gerhart Hauptmann's *Hanneles Himmelfahrt*, August Strindberg's *Dream Play*, Maurice Maeterlinck's *Blue Bird* and Ibsen's *When We Dead Awaken*. After reading *Dāk Ghar*, one might naturally ask: Who is Amal?—Is he the human soul? Who is the King?—Is he God? What does the King's letter mean?—Is it a message of deliverance? Who is Amal's foster-father, Mādhab Datta?—Is he the world? Whatever may be the answers to such questions, there is no doubt that whether it is Pañchak in *Achalāyatan* or Amal in *Dāk Ghar*, the character is not so much a person of flesh and blood as a personification of the poet's own subjective experience. It is, as it were, a part of universal life-force, and it functions not in the grosser world of matter but in the realm of spirit. One might almost say that it is a puppet in the hands of the artist which he compels to express, by its actions, his own emotions and ideas rather than a real being acting and re-acting in the world of men. That is why these plays are so simple and delicate and yet so profound. The symbolic idea hardly obtrudes, in fact it does not assume sufficient definiteness to clash with the unconventional freedom of the dramatic narrative. The human interest is sustained and the climax is reached by means of the simplest dramatic touches. Unless one cares to, one need never try to peep through the veil of the imagery.

Both these plays were published almost at the same time as the author's *Jīban Smṛti* (My Reminiscences) and, consequently, they are reminiscent of the experiences of his early childhood. The longing for the unknown and mysterious world, which was the

strongest tendency of his mind during his childhood, finds expression in these plays. In *Jīban Smṛti* he pictures how he was forbidden to go out of the house and how he used to take "peeps at nature from behind the barriers." "Beyond my reach there was the limitless thing called the Outside, of which flashes and sounds and scents used momentarily to come and touch me through its interstices. It seemed to want to play with me through the bars with so many gestures. But it was free and I was bound—there was no meeting. So the attraction was still the stronger."[1] *Achalāyatan* begins with a song of the call of the distant and the far-away, and the song contains the main motive to be developed in the play. The poet's favourite device of a care-free man or a wandering pilgrim appears in Dādā Ṭhākur with his band of out-castes (śoṇapāṁśus), the free men. Their life, which is natural because it obeys God's laws instead of man's, is set over against the life of the immovable sanctuary of prohibitions wherein youth is warped and crushed by the dead weight of old age and superstition. *Dāk Ghar* breathes the same spirit of the open air and freedom, and the longing for the unknown and the unknowable resolves itself into a representation of the whole problem of life and death.

The play that took the Bengali public by storm in the early part of 1916 was *Phālgunī*, translated into English under the title "The Cycle of Spring" and published in 1917.[2] It was written especially for the spring-festival of the Śāntiniketan school and was staged for the first time in Calcutta at the poet's Joṛāsāṁko house in aid of Bankura Famine Relief by the Śāntiniketan boys and girls in collaboration with certain members of the staff and some of the Tagore family. The play opens with a Prologue, which introduces a king who has fled away from his council-chamber to be in the company of a Poet who promises to entertain him with a play of approaching spring :—

[1] See *My Reminiscences*, p. 13.

[2] The quotations from this play are not from the poet's English version, but have been translated direct from the original Bengali edition of 1916, published by Mr. Apūrbakṛṣna Basu at the Indian Press, Allahabad.

KING: Very well, Poet, get ready with your stage preparations.

POET: No, Your Majesty, we are going to do it without any preparations. Truth looks tawdry when she is dressed up.

KING: But, the scenery—

POET: We don't need any scenery. The only background we need is the background of mind. On it we are going to create a picture by passing over it the brush of music.

KING: So you have songs in the play?

POET: Yes, Your Majesty. The door of each act will be opened by the key of song.

KING: What are the songs about?

POET: For instance, the Disrobing of Winter.

KING: But Poet, there is nothing about that in mythology.

POET: In the world-myth this song comes round in its turn. In the play of seasons the year is stripped of the disguise that it wore as Old Winter and is revealed as the figure of Spring, so that we see that it is the old that ever becomes new.

KING: So much for the songs—what about the rest of the play?

POET: Oh, that's all about life.

KING: What do you mean?

POET: Oh, there's a band of young folk, running after an Old Man. They have made a wager that they'll catch him. When they get inside a cave and catch him, they see—

KING: See what?

POET: Ah, that will all come out in good time.

KING: But I don't understand. Do your songs and the drama deal with different subjects?

POET: No, Your Majesty. The game that Spring plays in the World of Nature is one and the same with the game of Youth in human life. I have simply stolen the idea from the lyrical drama of the World-Poet.[1]

Thus the prelude sets forth plainly the subject-matter of the drama and the dramatist takes a fling at the conventional playwright and stage-practitioner. After the Prologue is over, the Poet sends a call into the air, which is immediately answered by the Heralds of Spring. The rustling Bamboo (represented by a little girl standing behind it) sings: "O wind of the south, wandering wind, swing me, sway me, softly—set my fresh young leaves a-rustling round me in their rapture"; the Birds sing, each from its nest (a troup of girls dancing represent the Birds): "The sky has flooded me with sunshine and I will flood the sky with songs"; then the Flowering Tree (disclosed among the branches of trees

[1] See *Phālgunī*, Bengali ed., 1916, pp. 19–20.

are boys representing the flowers) sings to the stream: "O streamlet, running swiftly, madly—I, the champak tree, stand ever still and cannot sleep for the fragrance of my flowers." The song-prelude ushers in the morning. A band of youths enter and sing: "O brother, see the fire of April leaps from wood to wood, from branch to branch, on flower and fruit, from leaf to leaf." A dialogue follows between the youths and Dādā, the philosopher. They make fun of his wise counsel and his attempts at poetry. He tells them to behave themselves, and says he wonders if ever they will grow up. But the boys are out for fun and have no respect for age. They go off in search of the Old Man whom they must find to make their festival complete.

A second song-prelude now begins. We find the Spring's Heralds stripping Winter of the garb of old age. Winter asks leave to go. The youths re-appear and ask the ferryman about the Old Man. But he does not know where he is nor does the watchman, who now comes on the scene. The whole neighbourhood thinks that the boys are raving mad. It is mid-day. The Heralds of Spring sing again, as winter is being unmasked and his hidden youth is about to be disclosed. Evening comes. And still the youths have not found the Old Man, but they have not lost heart. The Blind Minstrel (Bāul) comes and tells them that he can find the Old Man for them. They follow him as he walks out appealing in his song to his muse to lead him aright. As another song-prelude opens the next scene, which shows us the entrance to the cave, there enters a troup of blossoming flowers who introduce themselves in a song. Winter is now fully revealed as Spring and a jostling crowd of new leaves and flowers surround him and sing. Beauty welcomes him as a soldier-boy who has just won life at death's gate. Night falls. The youths re-enter, but without their leader, Chandrahās. They are sad at heart, for their search has been fruitless. Where has the Minstrel brought them? The Minstrel strikes his lute and sings. He tells them to wait for Chandrahās in front of the cave and Chandrahās is sure to come presently. A ray of light illumines the mouth of the cave and Chandrahās comes out and is welcomed with joy. But has he found the Old Man—the eternal Old Man of the world? He does not know; he cannot say. Thus youth has to

own defeat because there is no Old Man ; he is a fiction, a myth, for youth alone is real. It is day again. The sun has risen. Spring's festival has begun. All join in dancing and burst out into an ecstacy of song. Spring has awakened.

The play is not a mere phantasy, coloured by beautiful imagery and made melodious with musical lyrics. It is a serious work of art, which raises a number of interesting problems. The real meaning underlying it is not merely an intellectual problem lying hidden under an elaborately worked allegory. Neither is it revealed to us as an ethical problem in a didactic fashion, because the dramatist thoroughly dislikes the idea of preaching a moral or a spiritual doctrine through some mystical symbolism fastened upon his work purposely. The truth of the matter is that the inner meaning of Tagore cannot be grasped by the senses ; it has to be felt in the heart. That is precisely why he is so impatient with critics who find it necessary to extricate meaning from his plays. He hints at this specifically in the following passage in the Prologue of the play :—

KING : Shall I be able to understand the meaning of what you have written ?

POET : No, Your Majesty. What a poet writes is not intended to have any meaning.

KING : What then ?

POET : What's written is to be accepted just as it is. I told you this is all like a tune on a flute—not something that's to be understood but just a sound.

KING : What do you mean, Poet ? Is there no philosophy in it ?

POET : Not a bit.

KING : What does it say then ?

POET : It just says " Here am I ! " Does Your Majesty know the meaning of the first cry of the new-born child ? All of a sudden the infant hears the cry of the water and the earth and the sky calling him on every hand and saying, " Here am I ! " and his tiny little heart hears them and answers, " Here am I ! " My poem is like the cry of that new-born babe. It is the soul's response to the call of the universe.

KING : Nothing more than that ?

POET : No, nothing more. The soul in my song cries out—" In joy and sorrow, in work and rest, in life and death, in victory and defeat, in this world and the next, hail O ' Here am I ! ' O joyous ' Here am I ! ' all hail ! "

KING: Well, Poet, I can assure you, if your play has not got any philosophy in it, it won't pass muster now-a-days.

POET: That's quite true, Your Majesty. The modern folk in these days are much keener on acquiring than on understanding. They are clever, you see![1]

At the risk of falling under the condemnation of the Poet as too clever, one may perhaps venture to suggest that what most people will see in the play is something of this sort. Youth is eternal and ever victorious. It is always on the move, but it has more than mere movement. To quote from the play itself: "If youth had nothing in its movement but mere sprightliness, it would become parched and withered. In its movement there are tears as well; and that's why it keeps so fresh and green. When we come into the world we hear it saying not only 'Let me have' but 'Let me surrender.' In the twilight of creation 'Let me have' was wedded to 'Let me surrender.' Once this bond of union between them is broken, all is ruined."[2] Thus winter and spring, youth and age are only complementary parts of the one and the same cosmic force which constitutes the universe, and the eternal law of getting and surrendering binds them all together in a harmonic chain. In the destruction of the present lies the promise of the future and in the eternal struggle for beauty and perfection lies the promise of fulfilment. The old is for ever new.

The play taken as a dramatic picture reminds me very much of a leaping calf I once saw sculptured on a Minoan vase of ancient Crete. It is not an ordinary calf. It is drawn with such zest and animation of life that it ceases to be real in a physical sense. It is a symbol of youth. It is spring. It moves the mind like the sprightly rhythm of some of the dance-tunes of Bach and the leaping Polonaises of Liszt, and the mazurkas and waltzes of Chopin. So also does the leaping beauty of this exquisitely youthful play *Phālgunī*. It cannot be grasped logically by plain common sense, for it takes our mind away from all plausibility and makes us see, hear, and feel more than we are able to see, hear, and feel in an ordinary sense. It is born of an irresistible inner necessity in the mind of the artist, which has impelled him to feel intensely

[1] See *Phālgunī*, Bengali ed., 1916, pp. 17–18.
[2] *Ibid.*, p. 67.

and think deeply and then express his feelings and ideas sincerely. Much of the play may be dismissed as mere verbal jugglery and display of technical skill, but the picture of eternal, undying, leaping, advancing youth is full of such an ethereal and spiritual beauty as to stir one in the innermost recesses of one's being. Most of the charm of this beautiful picture must inevitably be lost save to one witnessing a performance of the play itself.

Rakta Karabī[1] (Red Oleanders) represents, more than any of his symbolical plays, Rabīndra Nāth's dramatic genius in its fullest maturity. It has for its main theme the conflict between the free spirit of man and a materialistic and mechanical order of society. It is a theme upon which Tagore is never tired of touching in one form or another, and is manifestly a further development of the ideas set forth in *Achalāyatan* and *Rājā*. The play opens in front of a royal palace in Yakṣa-Purī, where the bulk of the population slaves in the gold mines. The King is hidden from public gaze behind a net-work screen, before which the whole action of the play takes place. The affairs of the town are administered by his officials, and he himself never appears among his people, but busies himself in piling up the gold-nuggets that are being dug from the mines. None of the workmen can escape from their bondage except by death. They remind one of the Robots of Karel Čapek's play *R.U.R.*, mere machines, with numbers instead of names, completely under the mercy of a greedy super-capitalist. There is a Professor who also lives behind a net-work of scholarship and pedantry. He discusses philosophy and æsthetics with Nandinī, the heroine of the play—a woman so beautiful that even the King is enamoured of her. Nandinī has a lover, Rañjan by name, whom she adores and loves, and waits for his coming to liberate the people. Rañjan calls her his " Red Oleander " because the colour of his love is red like the oleanders she wears on her neck, on her breast and on her arms. This red of the oleanders is intended to suggest not only beauty and love, but a foreboding of the strange and fearful things that are about to happen. Kiśor, a boy-slave,

[1] The play was first published in its original Bengali version in *Prabasī*, a Calcutta literary monthly, in 1924. The English translation appeared later in the *Visvabhāratī Quarterly* (September).

worships Nandinī and brings her red oleanders even at the risk of his own life. Nandinī goes to have an audience with the King, but she can only speak to a voice that comes from behind the net-work curtain. She bids him come out of his seclusion and tells him, however much she may admire his strength, he ought to be ashamed of his cruelty to the workers and of his greed in grabbing at the dead wealth which they dig up for him out of the bowels of the earth. The King says he is weary of his strength and covets her love. But she cannot give him love in return, for she loves Rañjan, whose return to Yakṣa Purī she has been eagerly awaiting for ever so long. Workers, some of them in rebellious mood, pass before the palace, discussing their sorry plight and trying in vain to devise ways of escape from this hell of slavery. Biśu, a vagrant wanderer whom the Government had wanted to use as a spy, is the true friend of the workmen. Biśu is an enigmatical person who sings songs and really serves as a mouthpiece of the author's gentle satire upon the false political economy of Yakṣa-Purī. He mocks the tyranny of the machine-made institutions of the place and expresses a passion for a world entirely free from ugliness, cruelty and greedy, acquisitive passion. Nandinī is his idol and the symbol of all his noblest aspirations. But the wives of the workmen tell him that some day "that girl with her noose of red oleanders will drag him to perdition." Later in the play, Nandinī tells Biśu that she does not fear the King any more, for she has seen him face to face. He is hungry for love and wants desperately to live; for, when she had told him that she could give up her life for the love of Rañjan he got frightfully angry and drove her away. Biśu becomes a little apprehensive for her safety. In a third interview between Nandinī and the King, the King threatens to kill Rañjan if he ever gets hold of him. Nandinī says, "Those whom you have scared all along will one day feel ashamed to be afraid. If my Rañjan were here, he would have snapped his fingers in your face and not been afraid even if he had died for it." She goes off and waits for Rañjan by the wayside. Meanwhile, Biśu is arrested on a charge of inciting the workmen to insubordination. Rañjan comes at last, evading the watchfulness of the King's officials, but he is not seen upon the stage until he has been killed by the King

himself, when he had challenged him to fight. But the King does not know whom he has killed, and when he learns that it is Rañjan, he cries out—"I have killed youth. Yes, I have indeed killed youth—all these years, with all my strength. The curse of youth, dead, is upon me." He realizes that all his life has been a mistake and calls on Nandinī to help him to destroy the system that has been built up around him :—

NANDINĪ : What would you have me do ?

KING : To fight against *me*, but with your hand in mine. That fight has already begun. There's my flag. First I break the flag-staff—thus ! Next it's for you to tear its banner. Let your hand unite with mine to kill *me*, utterly kill *me*. That will be my emancipation.

GUARDS (*rushing up*) : What are you doing, Your Majesty ? You dare break the flag-staff, the holiest symbol of our divinity—the flag-staff which has its one point piercing the heart of the earth and the other that of heaven ? What a terrible sin—on the very day of the flag-worship ! Comrades, let us go and inform our Governor. (*They run off*)

KING : A great deal of breaking still remains to be done. You will come with me, Nandinī, won't you ?

NANDINĪ : I will.[1]

All that we hear now is that Nandinī has "dyed her garland the colour of oleanders with her heart's blood" and "gone in advance of all to the last freedom ;" the King has just gone off to his death, hearing Nandinī's call, and according to the Professor, "has at last had tidings of the secret of life ;" Rañjan has left behind "in death his conquering call—he will live again and cannot die ;" the workmen have broken into the prison and released Biśu, and the net-work before the palace has been torn to shreds. Finally Biśu comes out and calls on his comrades to come on to the fight, and as we hear the shouts of "Victory to Nandinī !" the curtain falls. A song dies away in the distance :

"Hark, it's autumn calling—
Come, O come away !"

Rakta Karabī has all the lyrical beauty of the earlier plays and dramatic sketches and the intellectual and spiritual depth of his developed thought. The rather severe satire in the play on the tyranny of a materialistic order of society, with all its

[1] "Red Oleanders," *Viśbvahāratī Quarterly*, Sept., 1924, p. 82.

ugliness and inhumanity, is relieved by an exquisitely delicate sensibility and imaginative beauty. If the author has lashed materialism and worldly greed, it is with a silken whip. If he has rebuked tyranny, cruelty and falsehood, it is with a gentle and benevolent kindliness. His satire does not sting—it only awakens pity and understanding. The character of Nandinī stands out vividly as a symbol of the grandeur and pathos of love which runs as a red thread through the tapestry of human bondage and slavery. She has "for her mantle," as the Professor says in one place in the play, "the green joy of the earth. That is our Nandinī. In this Yakṣa town, there are governors, foremen, headmen, tunnel-diggers, scholars like myself; there are policemen, executioners, undertakers—and they all fit in perfectly into the scheme of the place. She alone seems out of place here. Midst the clamour of the market-place she is like a lute in perfect tune." The author has used his extremest skill and imagination in the painting of the portrait of this lovely, warm-hearted and brave woman, and we cannot help feeling sad when she passes out of our sight like a bird of passage, like a figure made, as it were, of pure abstraction, passing out into nothingness, leaving nothing behind but her bracelet of red oleanders. The *dénoûment* exactly suits the poet's temperament. It seems strange that she who had made so vivid an impression upon us as a human being, as a physical reality, should come to such an end. But Rabīndra Nāth himself explains, "She is not an abstraction, but is pursued by an abstraction, like one tormented by a ghost. Nandinī is a real woman who knows that wealth and power are *māyā* and that the highest expression of life is in love which she manifests in the play in her love for Rañjan. But love-ties are ruthlessly molested by a megalomaniac ambition, while an acquisitive intellect plies its psychological curiosity, probing into the elusive mystery of love through vivisection . . . I have a stronger faith in the simple personality of man than in the prolific brood of machinery that wants to crowd it out. This personality—the divine essence of the Infinite in the vessel of the finite—has its last treasure-house in a woman's heart . . . The joy of this faith has inspired me to pour all my heart into painting against the background of black

shadows . . . the portrait of Nandinī as the saviour of the message of reality, the saviour through death." [1]

It will be quite evident that what the poet has attempted in this play is not the exposition of a new idea, but the clothing of his most vital thought on the problems of life and religion in a new outward attire. We have the same fruitlessness of idle curiosity and covetousness as in *Rājā*, we have the self-same futility of a machine-made order of life as in *Achalāyatan*, we have the same redeeming potency of love as a restorative in *Prakṛtir Pratiśodh*, we have also the same note of the eternal craving of the human spirit for the distant and the unknown as in *Dāk Ghar* and *Phālgunī*, but this time only in a slightly different dress. All these ideas again form coherent parts of the leading idea—the cruelty and stupidity of a mechanical and soul-less civilization. This idea is also closely bound up with the poet's favourite doctrine that each individual is enslaved or freed by something within himself, and that if he breaks the outward chains of authority, this is only the revelation of the freedom which he has achieved within himself. There is no need to hide the fact that by means of a dramatic parable Rabīndra Nāth quite frankly attempts a criticism of the political machinery of modern times and of the consequences of the commercialized civilization of the present day. In an article in the *Viśvabhāratī Quarterly* [2] the poet has said that the purpose of the play is to show what a menace to humanity is contained in the "organized avarice" which has captured the imagination of the Western races, and which threatens to "trample down life's true harvest" throughout the world. He says of this "grim apparition": "It is intensely real; its hot breath is upon us; its touch is all over our shrinking souls. It is the principal hero to-day in the drama of human history; and I trust I have the right to invoke it in my own play, not in the spirit of a politician, but of a poet, possibly a lyrical poet." [3] It is only natural that a play with such an avowed purpose by a man who holds very independent ideas on most

[1] See "Red Oleanders: Author's Interpretation," *Viśvabhāratī Quarterly*, October, 1925, p. 285.
[2] See October number, 1925, pp. 283–6.
[3] See *Viśvabhāratī Quarterly*, October, 1925, p. 284.

things, social, economic or political, and has frequently expressed himself quite strongly on the problems of modern civilization, should have a genuine present-day interest. There is a vast amount of abstract truth expressed through the different personages of this drama, which is wrought into a richness of imagery and delicacy of language and style by a master of beautiful words. The individuals of the play have not certainly come to life exactly in the way we might have expected, but they are much more than mere types. They are entities, and one and all succeed in conveying the poet's thought and feeling, and have the same universal appeal to human emotion which characterizes all his productions. Surely there could never be a mathematical measure of art, for all art in its essence must be universal. By universality we do not mean that all people will share an author's ideas or feelings ; in point of fact, they will not. Rabīndra Nāth's true universality of emotional appeal, in this play, consists in his exquisite rendering of the subtle beauty of human life and nature, in giving everlasting vitality to a flashing moment of joy or pain, and thus widening our sphere of understanding and sympathy. He enables us to grasp reality not so much through a process of reasoning as through feeling, and this end he achieves again and again with unmistakable success. Herein lies perhaps the real greatness of his art in rhyme or prose.

CHAPTER XXIX

His Dramatic Art

The dramatic art of Rabīndra Nāth is both simple and complex. In style and manner of expression it is simple ; in the variety of its forms and in the depth of its meaning it is complex. Primarily and essentially Rabīndra Nāth is a lyric poet and his dramatic art is at once so poetic and so personal that it would be more appropriate to distinguish his plays from ordinary dramatic productions as lyric dramas or dramatic lyrics. If ever there was a Bengali author whose works are saturated with his personality it is Rabīndra Nāth. Each one of his plays bears the stamp of the experiences of his own inner and outer life. He writes of the mental states and moods of men and of the progress of human thought and aspiration. None of his plays is to be understood merely objectively, as a representation of a series of events. It is intended to produce an æsthetic and emotional impression. He possesses wonderful ability to make his audience realize this and adopt such an attitude towards the play that they accept many things which they are compelled at least to question, when they are able to view it in proper perspective. Looking at one of his plays we invariably find our critical judgment held in abeyance, and though later it may reawaken and we may even feel inclined to resent the way we have been deceived, we cannot deny the remarkable power which has enabled the dramatist to affect us in this way. Wherein lies the secret of this power ? It certainly does not lie in the action of the plays or even in the psychological analysis of the characters. For, Rabīndra Nāth does not aim at constructing a story consisting in merely objective action, nor does he occupy himself exclusively with the tracing of the innermost workings of the minds of his characters. His power seems to lie in his amazing vitality of imagination and his remarkable ability to create an atmosphere which grows upon the mind,

not by the repetition of any central idea, but by magic, as it were. He weaves his words into a most delicate pattern of poetic prose. He can hold up the action with talk that makes action superfluous and the merely objective relation between one character and another seem unnecessary. His plots are nothing but little suggestive sketches meant to induce and express only an attitude of mind. Having set us laughing at a folly or weeping over the futility of human passions, he suddenly turns our laughter and tears alike into an emotion which is more exalted than either of them, to which he gives a lyrical expression of unearthly and romantic beauty. So while his plays, from the point of view of stage representation, are far from flawless, their vitality excels that of a dozen others merely made to dazzle an uncritical audience. As a matter of fact, he does not observe any of the accepted rules and conventions of the modern stage. His plays have a continuous action on the stage and are set against a background which is extremely simple and unostentatious. That is exactly how he concentrates the attention of his audience on the atmosphere that he is creating. As one of his characters says: "We don't need any scenery. The only background we need is the background of the mind." Truth, according to Rabīndra Nāth, looks tawdry if she is over-dressed. Thus he spiritualizes all dramatic action, as it were. He induces the spectator to become for one evening a sympathetic collaborator with his own mental processes. All his devices, all his jugglery of words, and all his wonderful magic of metaphor have this as their end. It is a habit with him to make all his characters talk in the same poetic style. In fact, he is far too prodigal of his poetry. The extremely rhetorical and sometimes paradoxical way in which all his characters speak makes it impossible for him to make them live before us in a convincing way. He uses much wit but little humour, much mockery but little irony, much keenness of intellect but little precision and straightforwardness. So his plays become merely plays of ideas, the reality of which is hidden behind a persistent and determined illusion. Even a most startingly realistic plot becomes a cloak for symbolism. Everyone in his plays is his puppet. His characters are all

as poetic as himself and one can never escape from the feeling that they are actors staging an idea, symbols, not human beings. His drama like his music, therefore, is just a rhythmic ebb and flow of many tunes, all alike apparently unsuited for harmonic orchestration. It is indeed capable of poetic heights, because the artist is intensely subjective and sensitive, but it is very apt to lose its simple and strange beauty in the endless maze of a useless reiteration of words and phrases. And in any case, the truth which he seeks to paint is never merely an objective or material thing but an abstract truth, a spiritual idea. This characteristic of his dramatic art is probably due to a Nietzsche-like instinct which hates everything non-æsthetic and to the desire to see things not as they are, but much fuller, stronger and larger. The fact is that the drama or the theatre is for Rabīndra Nāth just a device and an excuse for self-expression.

The last group of plays, which followed his dramatic dialogues, has already been described as symbolical and we have noticed the strain of mysticism which runs through them all. Perhaps it would be well to explain here more fully what this tendency of mysticism exactly represents. It is not enough to regard the boy "Amal" in *Dāk Ghar* as the human soul aspiring after God, or the "King of the Dark Chamber" as God trying to fulfil Himself in creation. These characters not only stand as symbols for certain ideas but personify certain vital and fundamental conceptions of the dramatist. They are also inseparable from the fundamental philosophy on which the plays have been founded. This philosophy constitutes Rabīndra Nāth's whole poetic creed—namely, the immanence of the Infinite in the finite and the struggle of the human spirit for freedom. Those who are acquainted with the make-up of his mind which, in its development through the varied experiences of life has already formulated a consistent scheme of the laws of the universe and the problems of human life, will not be in the least surprised at the importance which all this assumes in his dramatic art. He has only given concrete form to his spiritual conceptions—a form which may seem meaningless and mysterious to others but is nevertheless very real to the author. As he

himself has pointed out,[1] the popular conception that his plays are obscure almost always comes as a surprise to him, because generally works of this kind spring from a vision vivid to him alone and a feeling that belongs to his direct experience. To be frank, whatever obscurity there is, seems to be due not so much to the philosophical ideas with which Tagore deals as to the manner in which they are expressed. And the obscurity is still further deepened when in reply to criticism he attempts to extract from the play a meaning which one suspects was not present clearly, if at all, to his mind at the time of the original composition.[2] Rabīndra Nāth himself hates the vague and obscure just as much as any other great artist. For, there is a fundamental difference between what is mysterious and what is vague, just as real is the distinction between what is secret or hidden and what is obscure or indefinite. Rabīndra Nāth has no pretensions to be a spiritual teacher or philosopher either ; his claim is only to be recognized as a poet. But how can he help himself ? He is above everything else a romantic poet ; his revolt against materialistic

[1] See "Red Oleanders: The Author's Interpretation," *Viśvabhāratī Quarterly*, October, 1925, p. 283.

[2] It is interesting to recall here the long-protracted literary quarrel between Rabīndra Nāth and Dvijendra Lāl on this question of obscurity. Dismissing altogether the unnecessary and very unpleasant attacks and counter-attacks made by the followers of both Rabīndra Nāth and Dvijendra Lāl, one cannot help feeling that there was some element of truth in the charge of obscurity which Dvijendra Lāl brought against Rabīndra Nāth's verse and drama. The reader will find full information of the nature and circumstances of this literary skirmish in Mr. Deb Kumār Rāy Chaudhurī's *Life of Dvijendra Lāl*, pp. 512 ff., and Dvijendra Lāl's three Bengali articles entitled "Expressionism in Literature," "The Enjoyment of Literature," and "Ethics in Literature," published respectively in *Prabāsī*, Kārtik, 1312 B.S. ; *Baṅga Darśan*, Māgh, 1313 B.S. ; and *Sāhitya*, Jaiṣṭha, 1316 B.S. Dvijendra Lāl's main objection was against Rabīndra Nāth's deliberate attempt to find meaning in things which, as he maintained, did not really contain any meaning at all, and to give a spiritual significance to even the most ordinary and commonplace objects dealt with in his poetry. In the end, Dvijendra Lāl became somewhat vindictive and perpetrated some parodies of Tagore's poetry and some lampoons of his favourite ideas. He even went so far as to write a play called *Ānanda Bidāy* (Farewell to Joy), which contained personal references to Rabīndra Nāth, and allowed it to be publicly performed at the "Star Theatre." But it must be pointed out, in fairness to Dvijendra Lāl, that he never failed to express most enthusiastically his keenest appreciation of Rabīndra Nāth's genius and regretted very much the loss of an once intimate friend. We must admit that Dvijendra Lāl's attacks were not so much directed against Rabīndra Nāth himself as against his blind admirers, who deified him and regarded everything he wrote as sacrosanct and immune from criticism.

tradition, his insistence on the freedom of the soul, his transcendental love of beauty and nature, his conception of a super-sensuous and super-conscious Being, pervading the created universe, his thirst for the Infinite—all combine to impel him to adopt a medium of expression which becomes at once mystical and symbolical. It is not that by freeing himself from the accepted canons of art he gains absolute liberty of thought and expression. For, he makes his own laws, invents his own conventions, and accepts the duties and responsibilities of the rôle he has chosen for himself. Perhaps herein lies the whole mistake. He purposely allows himself to become the instrument of his art, which demands that he should say things by suggestion alone. So he has to render the unseen beauty and the fleeting fugitive moments of a world which exists outside the range of the ordinary mind into different shapes and forms of pictorial symbolism.

Mr. Edward Thompson's complaint [1] that Rabīndra Nāth's symbolical plays are characterized by "a tiresome insistence on the tremendous significance of the trivial" is not justified, because Rabīndra Nāth dislikes triviality and mediocrity of any kind. He only chooses to analyse exceptional characters in exceptional circumstances, and always aims at the expression of the ultimate, final essence of subjective life and consciousness. If his characters had more triviality they might have been more true to real life ; but they all live in a world which can only be understood by rising above the plane of matter. In this respect and also in his attempt to systematize his ideas and principles of symbolist art, Rabīndra Nāth has many striking points of resemblance with Maurice Maeterlinck. The French Symbolist Movement, of which Maeterlinck is perhaps the best exponent, is only an off-shoot of the Romantic Movement of the nineteenth century, but the Bengali Symbolist Movement, of which Tagore is the exponent, takes us back to the whole metaphysical system of Hindu religion and aesthetics which was in existence thousands of years ago. What Tagore has tried to do is to take up the Hindu philosophical doctrine of the Unconscious and Infinite and express it incessantly through his verse and

[1] See *Rabīndra Nāth, his Life and Work*, p. 81.

prose. He does this, not because he is anxious to preach a message, but solely because he believes it and has founded his entire æsthetic and poetic creed upon it. But he is too perfect an artist to express it loosely or formlessly. He is a master of the technique of language ; he knows how to build imagery upon imagery, how to clothe the most common and trivial happenings with the glamour and gleam of poetic fancy, how to keep a lyrical and ryhthmical correspondence between the speakers, their words and their surroundings and how to impart to everything a lofty idealism, a haunting sense of beauty and the delicate frolicsomeness of the open-air. He does not care about the meaning of words, because he believes that "to be clear of the meaning of words is not the most important function of human understanding." [1] His main object is "not to explain meanings but to knock at the door of the mind." [2] "The fact of the matter," as he further contends, "is that what is going on in the inner recesses of consciousness is not always known to the dweller on the surface." [3] In this view he seems to be contradicting himself, for he has always taken special care that not a single work of his shall be misconstrued in any way, and has been at elaborate pains to explain each one of them. It may be quite true that individual experiences vary a great deal and are not always capable of universal understanding, but certainly there are things which belong to the common experience of humanity which, if truly expressed, can never fail to arouse universal sympathy and understanding.

To attack Rabīndra Nāth or defend him is perhaps to attack or defend the literary movement he represents. This movement takes its origin, so far as its historical antecedents are concerned, in the Vaiṣṇava cult of æstheticism and romanticism. Vaiṣṇavism is perhaps the strongest tradition in Bengali art and literature. It has taken a far firmer hold of the Bengali imagination than the sterner cults of Śiva or of Chaṇḍī. In the life of Rabīndra Nāth two literary influences stand out as paramount—one that of the early Bengali lyrists such as Vidyāpati and Chaṇḍī Dās, and the other that of the European symbolists and romanticists. A systematic study of the poet's

[1] See *My Reminiscences*, p. 72. [2] *Ibid.* [3] *Ibid.*, p. 76.

early life and surroundings and the later development of his art would show that his main tendency has been to erect on naturalistic and romantic foundations a philosophy of life. The total effect of this Rousseau-like philosophy is rather away from the critical and positive spirit than towards it. An artist who wishes to assert himself not according to the accepted standards of art and morality but only on the authority of personal experience, is an individualist. His own personal and private self is the measure of all things and this measure, as Rabīndra Nāth has clearly revealed, is constantly moving and changing and seeking after novelties. To do this is apparently to surrender the critical and positive spirit and to adopt a more or less speculative attitude. Life would in this case be "an endless whirl of vain appearances," to quote a phrase from Leconte de Lisle, a noted French romanticist, or become "a perpetual gushing forth of novelties," as Henri Bergson says. In such a case, art does not portray life literally but aims at extricating the deeper or ideal truth from the flux of circumstance and seeks the reality of the One in Many or unity in variety. It follows that on this view it must be the privilege of imagination to give the sense of spaciousness, universality and infinitude. This attitude amounts to a plea for uniqueness, genius and originality, because it represents a romanticism of feeling rather than of action. This is precisely what Tagore means by a return to Nature and a striving after the unknown Infinite by discarding the materialism of modern civilization. This is the fundamental theme of *Rakta Karabī* and *Phālguni*. This is exactly what Rousseau, Chateaubriand and Wordsworth preached—the cult of wonder, the joy in primeval man and Nature, and in one word, the expansive eagerness of a man to get his own uniqueness uttered. The noble savage, the unspoiled peasant, the simple child are to be extolled in terms of the picturesque. It is similar to Bergson's theory of *élan vital* or ruling passion, which means giving free expression to artless, spontaneity. It must indulge in day-dreaming and express man's insatiable longing for an Arcadia—some land of heart's desire. So Rabīndra Nāth, like all true romanticists, has set up primitivism or the natural goodness of man as a philosophy or even as a

religion. He redeems the cruelty of civilization and decorum by that touch of wildness, that pleasant air of irresponsible discursiveness, that flavour of the open air and the free man. He invents a type of literary vagabond, with a gipsy strain in the blood, with an ingrained distaste for the routine of everyday life and conventionality. His Bāul or Blind Bard in *Phālgunī*, his Biśu Pāgal in *Rakta Karabī*, his Ṭhakurdādā in *Śāradotsab*, his Dādā Ṭhākur in *Achalayātan* are the varying types of such a vagabond and care-free soul. He either tramps along the open road or butts in into the action of the play with his mystical talk of the problems of life and the universe and transcendental beauty. He is splendid in his garulity and ecstatic in his musical moods. He is something more than a mere lover of Nature ; he is a worshipper of Nature with all the passionate ardour of his soul. Is this not the same as the glorification of the fiddler or tramp in the modern Irish drama, and the deification of the noble savage and the natural man by the disciples of Rousseau ? Rabīndra Nāth's literary programme, therefore, amounts in practice to the indulgence of infinite indeterminate desire and to an endless and aimless vagabondage of the emotions with the imagination as their free accomplice. He has created types of characters in his drama which not only do not exist in real life but which never can exist. Here again he shows a romantic nostalgia, a never-ending quest after the ever fleeting object of desire. This lies at the bottom of his romantic irony, which is the product of a violent emotional disillusionment. This is also the explanation of his romantic love for the call of the far-away flute, which he prescribes as the only anodyne for the ills of life. Strangely, this infinite of nostalgia is very apt to be mistaken for the infinite of religion. Here one may ask what is the true function of a poet's imagination ? To be concentric or eccentric ? By concentric, we mean, to see life as a series of illusions, not as a series of delusions. Indulging as he does in an eccentric and merely lyrical imagination, Rabīndra Nāth has to take recourse to paradox and ambiguous expressions. The Nature-cult or pantheistic revery leads his imagination to indulge in a state of pseudo-religion which is no substitute for genuine spiritual effort or divine

illumination. He sees in Nature what he himself has put there. His art becomes a mere projection of his own self. Because the ordinary world seems to him utterly insipid and dull, he has to introduce songs into every play to tell of the unknown ideal world of happiness and bliss and all the exquisite fugitive moments of joy which cannot be grasped by the senses. Songs break forth at irregular intervals and stop the action of the drama. As the Watchman asks Chandrahās in *Phālgunī*: "Is it your custom to answer questions by songs?" Chandrahā says: "Yes, otherwise the answer becomes too unintelligible." Watchman: "Then you think your songs intelligible?" Chandrahās: "Yes, quite, because they contain music." (*He sings.*) The Watchman is in despair, and says: "No ordinary being ever breaks out singing like this in the middle of talking." But Tagore, as we have said before, is *not* dealing with ordinary people. His individuals *are* extraordinary men and women, such as can best serve his self-expression. Thus he continually sacrifices the probable for the picturesque. He breaks up the smooth and tiresome surface of ordinary normal life by the pursuit of surprise and strangeness. For, reality to his mind can not be locked up in any set of formulae. So he gives to his work a gusto, a zest and a thrill impossible to an ordinary realist. He denies the very conditions which determine the special technique of realistic stage-craft. He becomes a "mighty prophet" and "a seer blest." It is, indeed, much easier to be an original genius than to be an artist on the terms imposed by the realities of the ordinary common-place things of life. Yet, if one looks back at his early lyrical and musical sketches and over the lengthening life of his dramatic dialogues and symbolical plays, one feels that from the first to the last they are all linked up and related to each other by a charm of personality that gives strength and beauty to them all. A shrewd knowledge of men and women underlies all his witty dialogues, and a joy in all life and a warm spirit of youth permeates all that he has written—that spirit of genuine youthfulness which he carries in his own self always and unfailingly, and which bubbles forth out of the heart of all his characters, young or old, into songs and always songs.

CONCLUSION

CHAPTER XXX

The Outlook

Looking back over the record of the modern Bengali drama and comparing it with that of the drama of other countries, the first thing that attracts one's notice is its comparative youth. The modern type of drama virtually began in Bengal in the early part of the nineteenth century, that is to say, on the advent of the British rule. Yet, in spite of its being perhaps the youngest drama in the world, it seems spiritually among the most mature. Indeed, it already shows signs of unnatural growth in certain respects before having gone through the experiences and gradual moulding processes of the developed stage-craft in European countries. This seems to be due to the fact that the Bengali drama had an enormous amount of valuable literary traditions and material to fall back upon and to draw from, without at the same time being wholly competent to handle the modern European methods of production in a suitable manner. The incongruity is further explained when one remembers that while the Bengali playwrights were using the old native sources, it was absolutely impossible for them to do more than adapt European dramatic principles and technique to Indian subjects.

The modern Bengali drama began under very auspicious circumstances, and, as we have already shown, was profoundly affected by social and political events not only in its own country but in other parts of the world. It is difficult to separate the history of the Bengali stage from the history of social and political changes in Bengal in the nineteenth century. In spite of very strong foreign influences and tendencies, Bengali drama exhibits to-day a quality and charm, distinctively its own. In the course of the last hundred and fifty years, it has not only

spread far and wide but has become a genuinely national institution, emancipated from servility whether to foreign or Sanskritic traditions. The value of the Bengali drama would not in any sense be diminished, had everything that was written in the form of drama before 1800 completely perished. There is a certain feeling abroad that modern Indian literature is far less worthy of study than the older and more ancient. It may be admitted that the history of Bengali literature presents a record of rather broken and often incoherent activities, and that its development is irregular, but so far as the Bengali drama is concerned, it is quite evident that it is intensely modern, in the sense that it represents the life and thought and feeling of to-day. By virtue of this modernity alone, it reveals that unity which binds Bengal to the outer world and makes Girīś Chandra, Dvijendra Lāl and Rabīndra Nāth critics and thinkers of the present generation. Whether we take the early work of Rām Nārāyaṇ and Madhu Sūdan or the later work of Dvijendra Lāl and Rabīndra Nāth, it possesses that universal subjectivity—that most persistent attempt to deal with the human mind rather than the external world. Taking it as a whole, the modern Bengali drama seems to be dominated by a more or less æsthetic and speculative attitude of mind rather than by an interest in external facts; and this is natural enough, since Bengali life itself has been dominated for many generations by emotional reflection rather than by objective activity. This typically subjective pre-occupation of the Bengali mind has profoundly impressed the entire body of the modern Bengali drama. Let us turn for a moment to the modern European drama to examine this question from a comparative stand-point. A considerable number of the modern European plays deals with much that is rather trivial, petty and inconsequential, and its stage is crowded with people whose names we forget, whose faces fade away in the endless changing panorama of human life, whose actions, if they accomplish anything at all, matter very little for the rest of the human race, and who only make traps for themselves by their own little weaknesses of character and mistakes of reckless passions. Now, this type of drama is so far entirely unknown in Bengal. It may be argued that Bengal

is not ridden with so many acute and intricate problems of sex and morality as modern Europe. It is quite true that Bengali life could not, in the present circumstances, furnish the material for the bedroom drama of Mr. Noel Coward or sex-plays of M. Eugène Brieux. But if human nature in its essence is the same all over the world and if it is to be judged from a broad angle of vision and interpreted by artists of real imagination, drama should be a matter of greatness and beauty rather than triviality and ugliness. It does no follow that unpleasant realities should be entirely omitted from a genuinely artistic production ; indeed, they cannot be, so long as human nature remains as it is ; but they must be harmonized and skilfully adjusted in such a way as to give a healthy and wholesome impression. In a word, the drama should be the revelation of the human spirit struggling with the forces of the world. The Greeks had a tragedy which portrayed the human spirit at odds with Destiny itself, and as Seneca has said : "A strong man matched with fortune is a sight for the gods to see." In the same manner, Bengali drama, following its spiritual traditions and speculative bent of mind, has more or less drawn on the larger rather than the smaller issues of life, but with this difference—that the minor, insignificant details of life, instead of being harmonized with the larger and more important ones, have been allowed to be altogether submerged in merely glorified pictures of ideal beauty, ideal truth and ideal happiness. Even the most ultra-modern of Bengali dramatists like Dvijendra Lāl and Rabīndra Nāth have drawn from the heroic legends and romantic tales of history and mythology the situation and characters of their plays and overlooked the stories that ordinary every day life might have furnished. And even when they have touched contemporary life, it is with such a depth of idealism and emotion that its subjective elements have completely overshadowed the objective realities. It is not so much the material of the Bengali plays as the tone and temper of the dramatists that make the Bengali drama so subjective and naturally so one-sided. Bengali playwrights have evaded realities in pursuit of ideals, and until they come to face the facts of life squarely and present them in strict accordance with the highest moral and spiritual standards of art, their

work will remain as useless as the ultra-realistic drama of modern Europe. The highest type of drama is that which brings into play beauty of form, nobility of purpose and dignity of mental outlook. These qualities cannot be exhibited or evoked either by painting an ideal world of perfection or by giving a picture of merely sordid and ugly realities. The Bengali playwrights of the future need not only to keep their reflective imagination within reasonable bounds of control and precision, but need also to gain more experience and fresh stimulus to thought and action from life as it is. The plays they will then produce will not only be true and real but will make a permanent appeal to humanity and will touch the emotions as well as inspire the soul.

The modern Bengali stage is still trying to get into touch with art and with life. It has not as yet fully succeeded in escaping from the contempt and indifference in which it has been held since its very beginning by social and religious reformers on the one hand and by orthodox critics on the other. Bengal has not yet developed any regular stage-technique to guide its dramatic productions ; whereas in Europe and America, in spite of the apparent confusion of various schools and various conflicting ideas, stage-craft may be said to have reached a definite point of achievement, and competent men in different lines of stage-production are experimenting with new ideas and trying new methods. The West has already developed quite a successful type of stage-craft, which aims at finding a true and just proportion between stage and auditorium, and a synthesis between the play and its setting. This will be clearly evident to anybody who cares to study the Western methods of planning and constructing theatres, of lighting and colour-schemes, and all the modern scientific facilities and appliances for producing theatrical illusion. These methods have been consistently sought by well-known *régisseurs* of the European drama, however much they may differ in matters of detail. Max Reinhardt gives first importance to the right kind of architectural designs suitable for a drama or an opera ; Gordon Craig wishes to bring the mechanical machinery of the stage into strict harmony with lighting, colour-effects and

dramatis personæ; and Adolphe Appia secures the success of a production by concentrating almost entirely upon lighting methods. Bengal has not yet its plastic and architectural stage. On a modern Bengali stage, which still employs painted canvas, the conflict between the dead setting and the living actor is inevitable. The dramatic illusion of a Bengali play is too apparent. Against two-dimensional painting on the back-drops and wings we have three-dimensional actors. This painted pretence will have to disappear completely before the Bengali stage can achieve any real success in modern productions. The painting of imaginary landscapes, roads, buildings and trees has to give way to the visual realism of architectural and plastic designs. Painting conveys flatness, no depth. Mountains, a sea-coast or any such distant object may occasionally have to be painted, but not the available things of every-day life which can very well be built up on the stage. In a modern play we not only want an illusion of reality but an illusion of actuality. The importance of this actual visual illusion lies in its ability to catch the eye of an audience; and the work of the designer or architect will be successful only so far as it can give the impression of the right kind of background which easily sets the imagination of the spectators working and at the same time rouses a kind of collective spirit, which alone is its *raison d'être*. So architectural design will have to be adopted by Bengali stage-practitioners, if they desire the ends of beauty and illusion and not mere trickery and false pretence. It is true that in Europe the architectural setting for the stage has not arrived at any point of real perfection, but the false pretence of the old type of stage-setting has been abandoned for ever. It is rather unfortunate that in the modern commercial theatre of the West the director and actor have been so much overshadowed by the electrician and architect. Against this the Bengali producers must be on their guard. They should never try to secure the success of a play merely by those artificial means which modern scientific machinery can so easily supply. A certain amount of anarchy was bound to happen in the European methods of stage-architecture; machinery took hold of the mind of a commercial producer in a rather destructive manner. Signor

Marinetti, an Italian Futurist, has even insisted that because the machine represents the spirit of the modern age, a drama ought to represent the life and movement of men as machines in which actors should be shown enclosed in cylinders and funnels. The Russian Proletariat theatre is being encouraged by Meierhold and Foregger to develop on similar lines. Of course, these are rather extreme cases of the employment of machinery for the stage. Man is not a marionette, and as such he cannot possibly be reduced into an organized piece of mechanism like a machine. A theatre is no real source of entertainment or inspiration by its conversion into a scheme of geometric figures, spirals and angles, oblongs and squares, with blotches of paint here and there. The fact is that Cubism, Vorticism and all forms of Futurist art have led to certain confusion in the standard of values, for the simple reason that they have gone beyond the limits imposed by the realistic, plastic stage. All Futurist experiments have followed in the main the principle of expressing emotions or ideas through merely unintelligible pictorial art, without the slightest regard for the actual reality of the objects painted. The deeply reflective attitude of a Futurist painter or architect has led him to represent objects that are not real but are the perversions of his eccentric imagination. The Futurist tendencies of European painting and stage-architecture have exercised a considerable influence on Bengali art and incidentally on Bengali stage-representations. The scenery which is usually designed by Messrs. Nanda Lāl Basu and Asit Kumār Hāldār for Rabīndra Nāth's plays is essentially of an impressionistic type. It looks like a bit of painted canvas of hazy and subdued colour and a weird assemblage of unintelligible angles and lines, made to suggest, if anything at all, something quaint, shadowy and unsubstantial. If we look at Mr. Gagenendra Nāth Tagore's sketches prepared for *Rakta Karabī*, we notice that they do not convey any directness or clarity of expression but a vague kind of emotional intimacy through subtle suggestions of lines and light and shade. The air of Bengal is thick to-day with such phrases as "symbolic," "rhythmic," "dynamic," and so on. The modern Bengali impressionist artists are vainly trying to find in these

formulæ some new medium of art-expression and are only distorting their art by crude and imitative methods. Of course, they represent that small section of Bengali artists of the school of Abanīndra Nāth Tagore, who are collaborating with Rabīndra Nāṭh Tagore in his dramatic productions. The vagueness of their methods is in a sense encouraged by the vagueness inherent in the plays of Rabīndra Nāth. So to Rabīndra Nāth's theatre which concerns itself with thoughts alone, the painting of a symbolistic type has been added, visualizing, as it were, the atmosphere of the play. But the proper function of a realistic plastic stage is not merely to produce an emotional atmosphere but to produce understanding and sympathy by means of a visual illusion of actuality. It has to give the impression of objects in terms of both inner and outer actuality—an actuality of form instead of an actuality of idea. The most significant thing achieved by these Bengali impressionistic painters is, however, the breakdown of false realism in form and content and false perspective in painting.[1] But until the electrician and architect, decorative artist and mechanic combine with the producer, playwright and actor, there will not come in Bengal any perfected type of a plastic stage—such a type as will allow of the successful and creditable production of modern plays. Light is the heart of the modern stage-picture to-day and is perhaps second only to the actor himself in importance. A modern actor cannot afford to dispense with the aid of lighting-effects if he is satisfactorily to represent different situations at different moments. The most constructive of all European *régisseur* in matters of lighting is Adolphe Appia, and it is to him the modern Bengali stage must look for practical suggestions and ideas. The Russians have brought painters like Léon Bakst and Roerich into their theatre, and Bengal must draw its inspiration from the artists of the younger generation. As regards the architectural and mechanical matters of the theatre, no one in Europe is a greater authority than Max Reinhardt. It would be well for Bengali

[1] So far the best and most convincingly realistic painting and designing for the stage have been done by Mr. Charu Rāy in the productions at Mr. Śiśir Kumār Bhāduṛī's theatre, "Nāṭya-Mandir." See pp. 232–3.

stage-architects to study him and try to understand his methods, which have proved so successful in Europe and America. If the Bengali stage is to develop on modern lines and to obtain a greater recognition, it will have to keep in touch with the modern developments in European stage-craft and incorporate some of its new methods and practices into its own lines of development. Tagore's contempt for external action and machinery will never help towards the achievement of a real stage-technique in Bengal.

The Bengali theatre of 1930 presents an interesting but rather a confused spectacle. There has certainly been what we may regard as post-war reformation but there is a lack of a consistent policy and firm imagination. A sort of theatre guild has recently been formed under the name of "Art Theatre, Limited," which owns the old "Star Theatre" and claims as its greatest success of the last season a very long run (three hundred performances) of a mythological play called *Karṇārjun*, and of the current year, a creditable production of a social drama entitled *Mantra-Śakti* (The Power of Marriage Sacrament), which has been dramatized from the Bengali novel of the same name of Anurūpa Devī. Rabīndra Nāth Tagore recently gave them permission to stage *Chira Kumār Sabhā* (Bachelor's Club)—dramatized version of an old work called *Prajāpatir Nirbandha*. A most encouraging sign of the times is that Rabīndra Nāth is permitting some of his plays, both old and new, to be staged at the professional theatres. Perhaps encouraged by the royalties he received from his first venture at the "Star Theatre," he has lately contributed three of his plays, namely *Bisarjan*, *Śeṣ-Rakṣā* and *Tapatī* to the repertoire of the "Nāṭya-Mandir, Ltd.,"—the youngest and most promising of the modern professional theatres in Calcutta. This theatre has for its director and guiding personality, Mr. Śiśir Kumār Bhāduṛī, decidedly the best actor and producer in Bengal to-day. Śiśir Kumār was a professor of a Calcutta college and first gained distinction as an amateur in many private performances. When he became a professional one expected big things of him—an expectation which he has so far more than amply justified. Śiśir Kumār is fighting single-handed against the antiquated fashions and practices of the

professional theatres of the old school, such as the "Minerva" and "Manomohan" theatres, and it seems something of a tragedy that he should be the only man on the modern Bengali stage to-day who possesses real ability and imagination. He has education, experience, and firmness of policy. He has all the qualities that make a good actor—personality, technique and temperament. He is a thorough student of modern European stage-craft, and, judging from his very recent productions, notably those of *Ālamgīr*, *Sītā*, *Ṣoṛaśī* and *Ramā*, the last two being social plays, dramatized from the original novels of Mr. Śarat Chandra Chatterji, Mr. Bhāduṛī has shown distinct originality in the art of production. He attends to accuracy of detail and perfection of technique. He keeps his eye on the setting against which his men and women are to stand and he knows how to handle his material so as to produce a harmony between the play and its atmosphere. He does not employ the stock-in-trade of the older stage-practitioners, and he is developing a new style which may become the approved style of the new age. Great actor as he is, he insists on simplicity and naturalness. He shuns declamation and vociferation; he does not shout and gesticulate like "Dāni Bābu" of the older school, but speaks his words with wonderful clarity and precision, with his eyes as well as his lips. He has taught his men and women to say momentous things in the most simple, natural and off-hand manner. Under his influence, his actors and actresses have broken away from traditional behaviour and artificial mentality. In fact, he is trying to permeate his actors and actresses with the simplicity and naturalness of his own style, so that quite a new type of actor and actress is rising in Bengal to-day.

One great obstacle to the improvement of the Bengali theatre is the objection of the Hindu community to actresses' parts being taken by women of good social standing. But ideas are changing and it is quite possible that the social ban will be lifted some day and that actresses will be recruited from all sections of society. When that happens, the Bengali theatre will have more dignity and moral prestige, and its taste, tone and atmosphere will be vastly improved. In Rabīndra Nāth's plays, boys and girls act together without constraint in public performances,

and this is not condemned as it might have been fifty years ago. Another and still greater drawback of the professional stage is its conservatism in matters of dress and costume. The managers only too often spend money recklessly on merely ostentatious and gaudy dresses which are absolutely unsuited for the time and circumstances of the play. It was not very long ago that in a performance of Girīś Chandra's *Praphulla* at the "Star Theatre," the dress of a jail-prisoner in the play was funny to the point of being ludicrous. Then there is that absurd combination of English blouse, Benārasī *sāṛī* and Hindustani slippers for the dress of a "Queen." Soldiers, porters, courtiers, and citizens are most indifferently dressed. Rājput, Pāthān or Mogul dresses are invented without the slightest regard to even the historical information available about them. In Paurāṇic plays, of course, there is some difficulty as to what the legendary heroes and heroines should wear, but the producers ought to exercise their own imagination instead of dressing up their men and women in the most fantastic costumes of the present day.

But by far the greatest obstacle to the development of the Bengali drama is the narrowness and ignorance of the professional actors and actresses of the old school. They are so stiff and so self-conscious and so tied down to the crude technicalities of their life that they can never step out of their theatrical rôles. If they would only get in touch with real life and find themselves in a world quite different from their own, the Bengali stage would be richer in experience and outlook. But the older type of professional theatre in Bengal is dominated by one great superstition that an actor has his appropriate type of part and must never be cast for another of a different sort. He may change his dress but never his mask or method, as he moves from one play to another. And even a play will be found for him that will just suit his part. In fact, this largely explains why the majority of the Calcutta theatres to-day are dominated mostly by the plays of the old masters. It can scarcely be otherwise so long as the theatres are in the hands of a small group of veteran professionals of the old generation. The managers do not show

the slightest regard for public sentiment and continue to stage only such plays as will allow their permanent stars to make good in their respective rôles. All that is wanted to remedy this state of affairs is that play-goers should show more independence and courage of conviction. If they support new ventures, new amateur companies, new authors and new experiments, the traditional monotony of the professional stage will be broken. We must have reverence for great things and great artists, but we must not allow tradition to become a fetish. There is only one tradition in drama—call it classical or romantic—which is not merely the practice of the past but also the continuous renewal in the present. Tradition is nothing but the result of successful experimentation. It is not meant to be an imposition from the past to fetter the present. It is a living force because it admits of being re-created and re-fashioned in the present. We must, therefore, beware of too much reverence for even Girīś Chandra or Dvijendra Lāl. Their works must be treated as things to be experimented with, and must not be continually produced in the traditional old-fashioned manner. There is no knowing when a single good play may be written, but good play will not follow good play unless three factors coexist : people who can write good plays, people who will produce good plays, and people who will go to see good plays. With the death of Girīś Chandra and Dvijendra Lāl, the first great epoch of the Bengali theatre came to an end. Their plays cannot possibly hold the modern stage for an indefinite period of time. So it would be the height of indiscretion on the part of a modern producer to feed his audiences night after night with one or other of the old masterpieces. The younger generation will have to furnish plays of its own time, to be acted by men and women of its own time, before the people of its own time. It should be the ambition of the theatre-technician to provide in his stage an artistic medium which shall not only give greater freedom of production to old masterpieces but clear the way for new dramatic works and enterprises. The stage must become the centre of sound, the centre of light, the centre of colour, and the centre of the affection and enthusiasm of the audience. In this

and this alone lies the hope of a good future for the Bengali drama. That hope can only be fulfilled in a durable and permanent alliance between actors and playwrights on the one hand and producers and stage-practitioners on the other. The scientific and artistic possibilities of the Bengali theatre under these conditions will be unlimited.

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